

AN OPEN LETTER FROM PAM NELSON OF LITTLETON, COLO. ON BEHALF OF COLUMBINE DISTRICT

Dear Fellow Members,

Thank you for your heartfelt daimoku and concern, which have meant so much to this community.

The following is a brief report of the recent tragedy at Columbine High School in terms of how it has impacted our family and our community.

Having just left my job of nearly three years — with great anxiety — to put all my resolve into doing the things in life that are important to me, I happened to be home on the morning of April 20. I was on the phone with my eldest daughter, Spring, when she interrupted our conversation to say that she had just heard on the television that there had been a shooting at Columbine (High School). I was on my way out the door to get my middle daughter, Dawn, to work, so I was unable to stay and find out what was going on. I drove her to work, then headed home, unable to get any news on the radio, apart from the strong implication that something was terribly wrong.

Unable to turn down Pierce (the street on which Columbine High School stands), I was re-routed and then re-routed again, finally parking on another sub-division quite some distance away and having to enter my own sub-division by foot. We live in the Leawood sub-division, only blocks from the high school. By this time, however, it was apparent that something very major and very ominous was going on, as Flight for Life helicopters, ambulances, police vehicles, etc., were everywhere, and noise and anxiety levels were running very high.

I should stop here to explain that we (my husband, Lauren, and I) have had at least one child in Columbine High School since the day we moved here 10 years ago, and that this is, in fact, the first year that we have not had a child in that school! Our youngest daughter graduated from Columbine last year, and Timmy, our son, is due to start there in the fall as a freshman. No words can say how grateful we are that our children were not there; however, there is no denying the impact of watching the suffering of our friends and neighbors in the community — of which there are many — and of being such an intimate part of the horrifying scenario.

But back to that morning. I passed Leawood Elementary on my trek home and saw parents getting out of their vehicles, or arriving on foot, running into the school, distraught and confused. I got home a few minutes later and turned on the television, and began to understand a little of what was transpiring, though news was sketchy and was still being pieced together even by those on the scene.

Still, I was supposed to pick up Spring and her young son, Louis, and then later go to a movie with Spring and for coffee with her and her friend, Jess, and I figured I'd better take a shower and get ready. I think this was the side of me running on automatic as I think people are prone to do when something horrible happens that they would just as soon not reckon with. I look back now and realize that I should have known then and there that this was going to be a life-changing event, but at the time, I refused to acknowledge it.

I took my shower, oddly enough, with one leg in the bathtub and the other one on the floor, in some state of disjointed readiness. Then I came downstairs and listened to the news, alternately chanting daimoku in front of the Gohonzon. And then I realized there

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was no way I was going anywhere. I called Spring and we called it off in favor of following events and chanting.

It was a very difficult day for everyone. My son's school was locked in and I didn't see him for several hours beyond the time I normally expect him home. Parents in our neighborhood waited for up to four excruciating hours to find out whether their high-school-aged children were safe or injured or worse. As it turned out, the sister of Spring's friend, with whom we were going to have coffee, was still in the school. (She would later get out safely.) The dearly loved teacher killed in the incident had been one of Spring's teachers during high school; my friend Sue's daughter was in the cafeteria when the shooting began; my next-door-neighbor's child was in the last group to make its way safely out of the school; my children's many friends had siblings wounded or best friends shot. Virtually no one living in this area was unaffected.

As most people reading this article already have a good sense of how events unfolded in this horrifying story, I will not go into that in any detail. However, I would like to share a bit of what we experienced and what we learned and how we were changed by it.

First, I would like to say that writing this article is not easy for me in that it brings to mind things that my mind would just as soon not relive. Today has been an especially difficult day — for many, I suspect, in that the memorial service is over, the funerals are taking place, and the media and spotlight are shifting to other events, leaving behind a stark and lonely reality. Still, there are things to share that should be shared, and that is my purpose in writing this article for my fellow SGI members.

We were very moved by the memorial service, attended by the Vice President of the United States, Al Gore, along with 70,000 others, and which we had the sober privilege of attending. We were particularly moved by the students, who, in large part, still stand undaunted. Of all the things that have touched me personally, the thing that has inspired me the most is the courage displayed by these students, and also by the faculty and all those working at that school in any capacity. Those who have lived through crisis will know that things do not always go this way. Especially where survival is at stake (as SGI President Ikeda has written about in his accounts of the Titanic, for example), there are many who take the safe and easy way, often at the expense of others.

I myself have experienced personal tragedy on another, less life-threatening level, which shook my faith in humanity for some time afterward. Only with daimoku was I able to come to a different place in my thinking. However, with this incident, ironically enough, my faith in humanity has definitively been restored.

As the stories started coming out, it became evident that these people reacted to crisis in a courageous and noble manner that has been an inspiration to all those around them — kids who held doors open for others to escape; the janitor who saw kids to safety rather than take the easy exit; the boy who draped himself over his sister and her friend, so that he would be the one shot; the kids who refused to leave their dying teacher, the teacher who saved so many by staying behind to help evacuate them, sacrificing his life in the process.

Then there was the girl who was asked by the gunman if she believed in God; she answered, "There is a God, and you need to follow along God's path," and was subsequently shot point blank. No matter what spiritual path that girl had faith in, there is something pure and noble in her willingness to stand up for it, no matter the cost, much as Soka Gakkai presidents Makiguchi and Toda did for the sake of Buddhism, and as President

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Ikeda teaches us to do on behalf of truth and justice as we see it.

Living in this area — Columbine, which is an unincorporated part of Jefferson County — I have had the privilege of experiencing the true meaning of community spirit.

The support for one another during this crisis has been incredible — truly a thing to behold, as testified to by the many flowers and signs evident throughout the community and by the beautiful makeshift memorial, started as a handful of flowers and which has grown in parallel proportion to the hearts of the people. This is a beautiful area, predominantly Christian, but which embraces a healthy live-and-let-live morality in which we have been accepted as Buddhists with little fanfare, always well treated by our neighbors.

My children have asked me whether, after living through this tragedy, I want to move away, and my answer, unconditionally, is no. Well, I mean, someday I also want my little cabin

up in the mountains...but Buddhism teaches that there are no coincidences. We chose to live here for a reason and we have lived through this experience, along with our neighbors, for a reason. Furthermore, I am so proud of this community and of the way people have handled themselves and how much they have pulled together to see each other through. I have always liked to think of myself as a citizen of the world, but no matter where life takes me in the future, I will always be proud to have been a resident of beautiful Littleton, Colo.

I need also to say thank you to the many people who called our home, members and non-members alike, from all over the country, to make sure that we were all right. There are no words to express how much this means in a time of crisis, to which I'm sure the parents of injured and slain children would attest. The world's care has been a source of hope and inspiration to everyone here, so please don't ever be afraid to express your concern at a time of crisis for fear of imposing; I have learned that your concern as a fellow human being is what makes the healing possible, and that nothing is as important in life as having good friends.

None of us will ever be the same after this incident, but nor should we be. To remain the same would be the greatest tragedy of all, and it behooves all of us to view the terrible events at Columbine High School as a call to action.

Which brings me finally to the name *Columbine*, which happens to be the name of our SGI-USA district, and which has, in my mind, deep significance in both its connection to the tragedy and in the roots of its meaning. The columbine is Colorado's state flower, which grows primarily at higher altitudes, and "Where the Columbines Grow" is Colorado's state song. The columbine was chosen as the state flower because it was perceived that the colors were representative of the state itself — blue for the skies, white for the snow, and yellow for the gold discovered here.

After seeing how this tragedy has revealed the greatness of the people living here, I would like to add that the blue stands also for nobility, the white for purity, and the yellow for the gold in people's hearts. The fact that it grows at higher altitudes represents the blossoming of our higher life-condition, and the fact that it is a wildflower speaks for its innate resilience. But because this incident touched the lives of people the world over, I believe that the columbine also represents these noble virtues, this elevated life-condition, and this innate resilience at the core of all people.

So the question then becomes, will our society blossom through this incident or be crushed by it? Will we allow the flower of youth to be trampled upon? Or will we stand up to protect our children, just as in 1925, the government of Colorado made it the duty

of all citizens to protect the columbine from needless destruction or waste? I like to think that the tragedy of Columbine High School will be a starting point for all the world to come together, following in the example of this great community. My personal resolve is that this be so, starting with me, starting with my Buddhist practice, starting with this very moment. I have already outlined my personal plan of action on this account, and now I must do as we all must do if change is what we truly want and insist upon — follow through —let our actions speak even louder than our words of grief and hope.

Thanks again,
Pam Nelson

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