

IF ONLY I HAD  
KNOWN  
— *A True Story* —

WILLIAM H. DODSON, PH.D.

I F P

INTERNATIONAL FOCUS PRESS  
RICHARDSON, TEXAS



*Published by*

International Focus Press

P.O. Box 831587, Richardson, Texas 75083-1587

www.ifpinc.com

Copyright © William H. Dodson. All rights reserved under  
International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions.  
Published in the United States by International Focus Press.  
No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted,  
or stored in a retrieval system in any form without prior  
written permission from International Focus Press.

ISBN 978-0-9639103-7-0

Library of Congress Control Number: 2009932274

For quantity purchases, please contact  
International Focus Press.

With the advent of the Internet and late-breaking stories, source information  
was not available for all images, especially from some foreign websites.  
Appropriate attribution will be provided on the IFP Live Addendum  
page for this book and in subsequent printings/editions as it is obtained.

1. School Violence 2. Education 3. Crime 4. Criminology  
5. Violence in Society 6. Crime Prevention 7. Current Events

*Printed in the United States of America*

First Printing September 2009



— DEDICATION —

*With loving respect to my wife Nancey,  
who for forty-eight years and with faith and  
purpose has dedicated her life to our family.*

*And with love to the grandest  
daughters a dad could ever have:  
Cindy Dodson Martin and Susan Dodson Ellison.*

# CONTENTS

1. Tragedy On My Watch	1
2. Pearl & Columbine: Worlds Apart—Same Result	7
3. The Attack	15
4. Monster in the Hallway	27
5. A Personal Debrief	43
6. The Kroth Gang	51
7. Visits to Luke	63
8. The Random Actor Profile	75
9. The 3–Point Intervention	99
10. The Way Out . . .	121
11. Feds, Bullying, and the Missing Protector Strategy	133
12. Other Issues	155
13. The Unlikely Juror	167
14. Heroes	181
Acknowledgements	195
Source Notes	196

# PREFACE



For updates to *If Only I Had Known*, please refer to the “Live Addendum” page on the International Focus Press website ([www.ifpinc.com](http://www.ifpinc.com)). Also, this project is unusual in that the publisher, Dan Korem is also a contributor to Chapters 8, 9, and 10, which is adapted from his book *Rage of the Random Actor—Disarming Catastrophic Acts and Restoring Lives* (2005).

## CHAPTER 1

# TRAGEDY ON MY WATCH

On October 1, 1997, when I was superintendent of Pearl Public Schools in Jackson, Mississippi, Luke Woodham, a sixteen-year-old sophomore, stabbed and bludgeoned his mother to death, then took a rifle to Pearl High School and shot nine students. Two died; seven were wounded.

The act seemed to come out of the blue, with Luke Woodham randomly shooting anyone who moved. He did it in a usually safe and serene community.

And he did it on my watch.

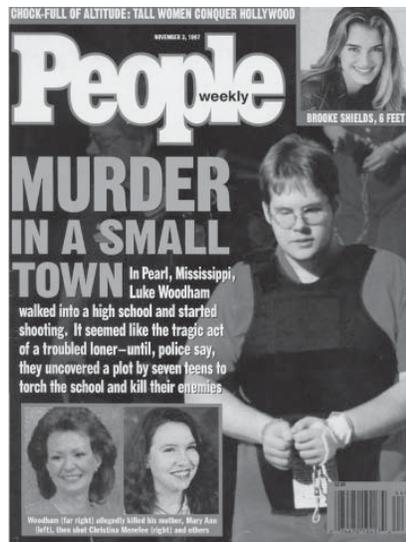
That shocking day and its awful events are never far from my mind. It started an unsettling national wave of violence in otherwise placid neighborhoods and schools—in statistically safe suburbs and small towns. And it provoked a personal ten-year hunt to answer the question: What could we have done to prevent the attack? What did we miss?

Two months after the Pearl assault—December 1, 1997—a student attack in West Paducah, Kentucky, killed three students and injured five. On March 24, 1998, in a Jonesboro, Arkansas, attack, three students and one teacher were killed; ten were injured. On May 21, 1998, a high school shooter in Springfield, Oregon, killed

two students as well as both his parents. Then on April 20, 1999, a massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, claimed the lives of fifteen—and the teenage gunmen committed suicide as law enforcement tried to secure the school.

Similar attacks have spread to Canada and European countries such as Germany, Finland, and Greece. To date, the largest high school attack took place in tranquil Erfurt, Germany, in 2002—where 16 students were slain. The greatest loss of life on a college campus took place at Virginia Tech in 2007, where 32 were slain.

Nationally, the Pearl attack caught the media's attention because it was the first in many years. There had been earlier school attacks in Bath, Maine (a bombing in 1927 by an adult), at the University of Texas (adult student sniper in the campus bell tower in 1966), and Moose



Lake, Washington (teenager shooting attack, 1996). Those isolated incidents, though, didn't start a trend. The attack at Pearl High school changed that. It involved gang and satanic overtones led by a master-mind college student who preyed on the insecurities of younger high school students. It had the intrigue of devil worship, animal torture, home-grown gang crime, and the trial of six students charged as conspirators after the murder of Luke Woodham's mother and the school attack.

The Pearl incident and other school violence sparked national conferences and studies as well as a debate about guns on campus—because our assistant principal, an officer in a local National Guard

unit, retrieved his pistol from his parked car and used it to apprehend Luke Woodham as he fled the school.

One of those studies, conducted by the FBI in 1999, concluded that we can't identify students who are likely to commit such violent attacks. The Secret Service and the Department of Education came to the same conclusion in a 2002 report. Millions of dollars were spent on those studies, and if they were right, I wouldn't have written this book.

The fact is that there *are* predictors:

First, we *can* identify most of these students—even before they ever think about committing a violent act—and without stereotyping or stigmatizing them.

Second, there *is* an intervention that guides most of these students out of harm's way.

Third, there are specific reasons that these incidents typically happen in the safest locales—suburbs and small towns—and almost never in the inner-city. Conversely, students in the nation's thousands of alternative discipline schools for *at-risk* students never hatch massacre plots. Think of it: a population of *only at-risk* schools that logically would be *most* likely to have an attack . . . yet, they rarely if ever suffer the attacks that “stable” schools experience. Paradoxical as it seems, it's a fact.

The purpose of this book is twofold. One, what happened to us at Pearl can happen in your community, even if it's considered safe, statistically—*especially* if it's considered safe, statistically. Two, there *is* something we can do.

While this isn't a “true crime” book, included here are vivid descriptions of the attack as provided by Pearl's assistant principal, Joel Myrick—who not only witnessed the attack but also armed himself and apprehended Luke Woodham, thus perhaps preventing further loss of life. His moment-by-moment account will put you at the scene and help you understand what we experienced. Also, a

juror at one of Luke Woodham's trials, an educator with a doctorate and an emphasis in criminal justice, records her experience. Finally, I'll share my prison visits with Luke Woodham—and his responses when I asked him if there was anything we could have done to prevent the attack.

Those story threads are interesting, enlightening, and help flesh out this book's narrative. But the important story, as suggested above, is that there is a body of research aimed at recognizing and preventing these rampages. This research was conducted over twenty-plus years by investigative journalist Dan Korem, and his findings led him to predict in the early '90s the wave of school attacks that would follow. He specifically stated that the attacks would be committed by students with the Random Actor behavioral profile, a profile he developed as a component of the *Korem Profiling System* which was published in his book, *The Art of Profiling—Reading People Right the First Time*. We'll look at Korem's work<sup>1</sup> in greater detail later. For now, a broad outline of how he stumbled onto his two-decade course of research will suffice.

Imagine that you just solved the riddle of why there are mass shootings in the Post Office but not FedEx—even though both are in the delivery business. And you discovered not only what FedEx was doing differently from the USPS but also how to replicate those differences in any organization.

At the same time, you happened to be doing research for a book on suburban gangs . . . and you see a significant number of kids with the same profile as the postal shooter—traits you've now identified as the Random Actor profile.

What would you do?

You'd get the word out to schools—including how to apply FedEx's techniques to guide those at-risk students out of harm's way so they never commit an attack.

That's what Korem did.

He took his information to education and law enforcement professionals before the school attacks, warning them of the trend before it developed.

After the flurry of attacks that began with Pearl, many schools across the country deployed Korem's strategies. The results were stunning: attacks were averted, threats were reduced, building evacuations decreased, discipline/behavioral referrals of students with Random Actor traits diminished, and their classroom performance improved. (We'll discuss these strategies and results later.)

Since 1997, more than 15,000 educators and 5,000 law enforcement and military professionals have applied Korem's research with similar success. And, after 9/11, when thousands of students made terrorist threats against North American schools and thousands of schools temporarily closed, one region in the United States did not receive such threats. It was the only region that deployed Korem's violence prevention strategies in its schools.

It's now 2009 and the tenth anniversary of the Columbine massacre. Immediately before Columbine, schools received 25 to 50 authentic student attack threats with bombs or guns a day. Today, that number is 75 to 100 per day (see Chapter 8).

Also, 2009 saw the release of the nightmarish, true-crime book *Columbine*, which dispelled myths about the attack. Like other books on student-led attacks, though, it never answered the critical *why* questions. As far away as Ireland, Mary McCloskey in the *Irish Times* wrote a book review of *Columbine* entitled, "Study of Columbine killings that fails to address key question: Why?"

Because answers to the "why" questions aren't common knowledge amongst educators, media continue to propagate the myths. On April 20, 2009, for example, a *Dallas Morning News* columnist wrote in an article titled, "Lesson from Columbine is disturbingly simple":

The lesson should be that some people—mercifully, a very few—have such dark and mutated souls that they are capable

of doing terrible and deliberate damage. Trying to stop them before the fact provokes the same civil rights debate that complicates efforts to prevent terrorism. If we tried to lock up every angry teenager with a creepy violence obsession, we wouldn't have a place to put them all. That's not the popular, ideologically elastic answer most people want. I'm afraid, though, it might be the only one there is.

In other words, most of these students are dark monsters—and we can't try to help them without violating their civil rights. That's a myth. Random Actor violence prevention strategies were used in Pearl after the Woodham attack, and we had neither lawsuit nor complaint. Neither have hundreds of schools or private and public sector organizations.

The reality is that students aren't stigmatized when certain strategies are appropriately applied. I've been an educator for over forty years and have learned that, just as with any other troubled student, you can reach out to students with the Random Actor profile without violating civil rights and unwarranted stereotyping.

I have no doubt that had we at Pearl identified students with Random Actor traits and applied Korem's intervention techniques, we would not have had an attack. I am also certain of something else: We must focus on *prevention* rather than on *reaction*. And in this book, I hope to share with you the recognition and prevention techniques that will keep you from walking in my shoes, lamenting *if only I had known . . . .*