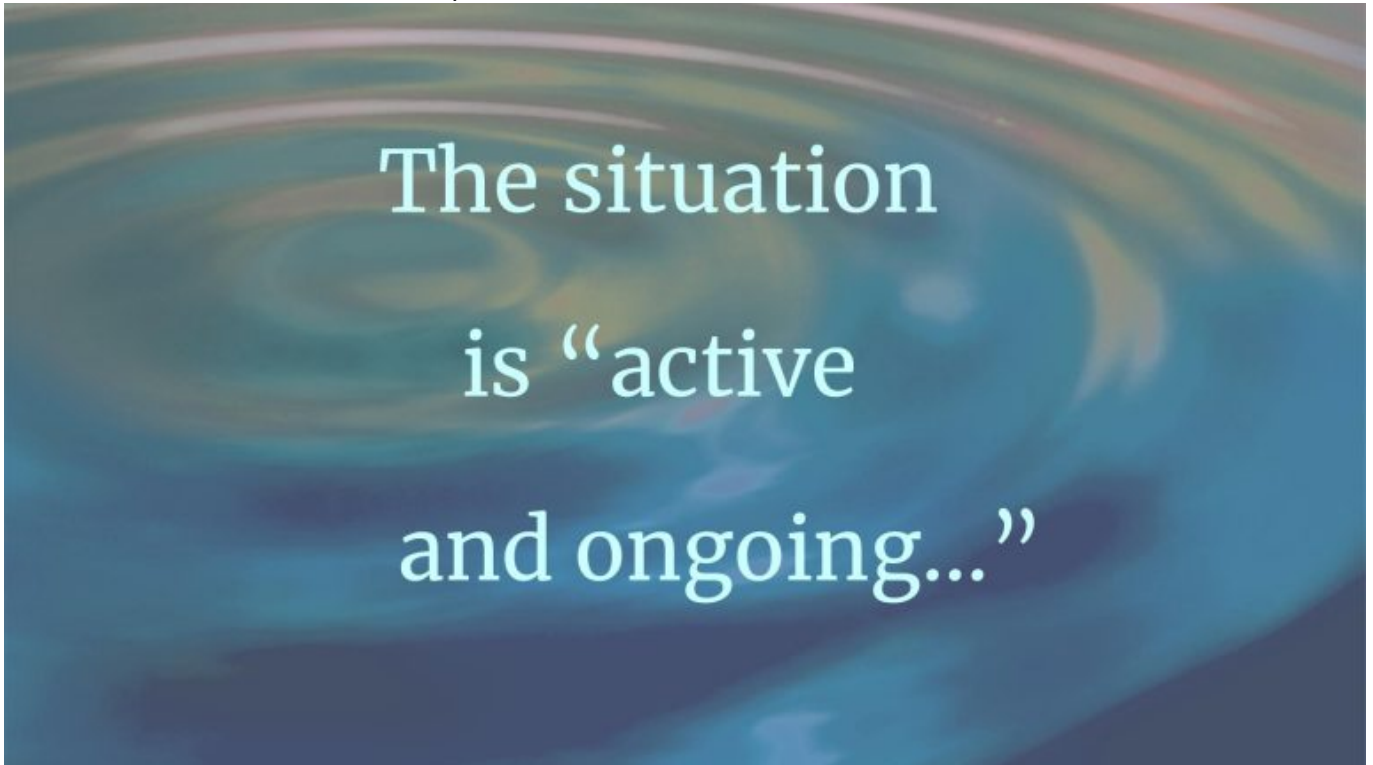


# Shooter

Category: Stories

written by Scott Janssen | September 8, 2023



*Monday, August 28, 1:15 pm  
Chapel Hill, NC*

"Remain inside the building until further notice."

The security alert on my phone screen is terse. Part of me is annoyed by its tone—long on commands, short on details. Sitting safely in my car after visiting a hospice patient, twenty miles from UNC's hospital and university in Chapel Hill, I ignore the text, chalking it up to an overreaction by the security department.

The next alert, twenty minutes later, gets my attention. There's an "armed and dangerous" intruder on campus. Staff on the healthcare and academic campuses should find cover and shelter in place.

Then another. There's a "shooter." The situation is "active and ongoing." The hospice director emails a photograph of the suspect: "If sighted, stay clear and call 911."

My wife calls me. The news is broadcasting reports of a campus shooting. They're showing images of panicked students and heavily armed cops.

Earlier in the day, driving to work, I'd passed through the heart of UNC's Chapel Hill campus and seen a parade of students walking, standing at bus stops, talking with friends in the morning mist, gearing up for a new semester.

In front of one building, a crowd sipped coffee and milled about under a banner emblazoned in Tar Heel blue letters: "Welcome Students!"

Reaching my office at the university hospital, I dashed off an email to a friend who teaches at Michigan State University. Back in February, he'd wrapped up a class at around 5:30 pm, and less than two hours later an assailant arrived at the same building and began gunning people down, killing three students and injuring five.

I told him that he was on my mind today, as the MSU community started its first semester since that bloody day. Speculating that this might bring up powerful memories and emotions, I told him I was around if he wanted to talk.

Now, *holy crap*, there's a shooter here at UNC.

I turn on the radio. Information is thin and contradictory. Unlike shootings that occur in faraway places, this one could involve people I know. In hospital departments like oncology and palliative care, a body count might include some of my friends.

My mind reels with images of people who may be in harm's way.

The ambulance crews with whom I've swapped small talk as they transferred patients to our hospice inpatient unit. Local police officers with whom I'd shared friendly banter after we'd responded jointly to mental-health crises. Professors at the schools of social work and medicine, the reception staff who've answered the phones or greeted me over the years, the medical students and counseling interns who've shadowed me as I visited hospice patients.

A hospice chaplain I know has spoken of his brother, who was working security at Virginia Tech University in 2007 when thirty-two students were murdered in a mass shooting. His brother is still haunted by the memory of hearing cell phones going off in the backpacks of the students lying dead on the ground as their friends and family tried desperately to reach them.

*How many calls, texts and emails are being sent right now by terrified students, parents, siblings, partners and friends?* I wonder.

Although I long ago shed any delusion that something like this "can't happen here," things feel surreal, confusing and very personal. I'm agitated. It's hard to focus on work. I want information, but all that's coming in are warnings, unconfirmed reports and speculation.

When I arrive home that evening, there's still no clarity about what the hell is going on. As I talk with my wife, we share a sense of sadness and foreboding. We're bracing for the worst. Why does it take so long to hear the details? I don't remember experiencing this agonizing delay in other shootings of this kind, or feeling so keenly how imagination and emotion can join forces to spin out horrific what-if scenarios.

But these other shootings weren't in my back yard. It was easier to wait for a neat media synopsis, a day or two after the bodies had been tagged and

removed.

My wife is a psychotherapist, and many of her clients work or study at UNC. After we talk, she closes her office door for, as luck would have it, multiple previously scheduled teletherapy sessions. When she comes out, I give her an inquiring look.

"They're shaken," she says, without going into specifics, careful as always to protect her clients' confidentiality. "But they're okay."

She tells me she's heard that a professor was killed. The department is unknown. It's unsure whether others are dead or injured.

By the time we're ready for bed, a suspect has been arrested, and the media has confirmed a professor's death. No other details.

The next morning, there's no new information. "Authorities are in the process of contacting the victim's next of kin."

I think of a social worker I know, whose team will surely be deployed today to provide support for staff and students. I think of people I know at local funeral homes. One of them will be caring for the victim's body and family.

Driving to work, I wince at the thought of having to sit through the all-too-predictable pattern I know is coming.

Media seeking out images of people under duress, pushing cameras into faces and waiting for some kind of emotion—sadness, anger, fear—that the newscasters can exploit as they mouth scripted words like "tragedy" and "senseless."

Politicians who blame and pretend to care about "mental-health issues," while doing their best to deflect attention from guns. Others who produce soundbites about the need for "sensible gun reform," but don't have the moral courage to do more than talk. Some who even argue that what we need are *more* guns. Maybe we should arm teachers, beef up armed security, develop a machine-gun-packing robot that's ready to instantly kill any suspected perpetrator. What could go wrong?

Then back to the media for another round of tired, infuriating talk about congressional logjams and divided opinions, more excuses for inaction. Who, exactly, is standing in the way of change?

Then, nothing.

Until the next time, often the next day, when the cycle recurs. We who want something done—the majority of Americans—are left blaming politicians in general, feeling powerless, and afraid for our children.

As I drive up to a stop light, I'm penetrated by sadness and grief. Not just for my community but for our human family. And I'm exhausted by all the violence, here and around the country, and constantly wondering if loved ones

are safe.

Suddenly I do a double-take, then slam on the brakes. A scooter stands in the left lane, right in front of me, waiting for the light to change. On it is a young guy—maybe a student, headed toward the university. I bristle, thinking, *This fool needs to get into the bike lane.*

The light changes, and he heads off, his chaotically unkempt hair blowing in the wind. It looks just like my hair once looked, back in the 1970s. As we hit a hill, the road narrows to a single lane, and he slows down. Ordinarily I'd accelerate and pass him; maybe I'd also roll down my window and shout at him to get a damn helmet.

This morning, though, I feel fiercely, even tenderly, protective of him. He looks so vulnerable.

All I want in this moment is to make sure that he's safe, and that he gets to where he's going in one piece. I give him space and turn on my flashers to alert drivers behind us to slow down.

Approaching the next light, the young man puts on his turn signal, preparing to wend his way into a honeycomb of brick buildings where classes are held.

As I pass him, I think of an old Irish proverb: "We live in the shelter of each other."

And I start to cry.