

The emotions I am experiencing right now are hard to put into words. There is no clear cut feeling, just a mishmash of rage, frustration, anguish, helplessness and immeasurable grief.

Although I did not know any of the victims personally, I feel a compelling urge to do whatever I can to preserve their memory. That is why I attended the memorial service at Rudder Fountain. That is why I stood at the Polo Fields for hours in stunned silence. That is why I am writing this column.

The obligation I am feeling has taught me a valuable lesson: Despite what everyone says, the Aggie spirit is alive and well.

I know, it sounds incredibly idealistic and downright corny of me to say that, but it is so true. Many of the out-of-town media outlets have referred to

the Aggie spirit

with amazement and skepticism. How could these college students have this ridiculous level of pride and loyalty for their school and their classmates?

To an outsider, our actions have been out of the ordinary. To me, it is just another day in Aggieland.

The compassion and support I have witnessed in the past several days has touched me beyond belief. You should be proud that for a brief moment, the world stopped and tried to understand what it means to be an Aggie. Although they can never completely understand, the overflow of the Aggie spirit here has warmed their hearts and you should be commended for that.

To the families of the victims, I offer my deepest sympathies and condolences. Please believe me, your children did not die in vain. They will serve as a permanent reminder of how strong and unwavering the Aggie spirit really is. No one will doubt that ever again.

DAVID LEE IS A JUNIOR ECONOMICS MAJOR.

One of the fundamental falsehoods all parents want to believe is that their children will outlive them. The anger and grief are compounded when, instead, we find ourselves having to go on without our children. Nature, and the order of things, says our children will live long after we are dust.

Twelve sets of parents are grappling with this upside-down reality this week. Many of them may have sent their children here because of the traditions and because they felt safe having their children at a conservative school. They felt their children would not be in danger.

The second fundamental falsehood we believe, often unquestioningly, is that we can do something to make or keep our children safe. When those children arrived as helpless infants, it was clear we were supposed to do exactly that.

But now comes an unimaginable tragedy, and twelve sets of parents must reconcile themselves not only to the loss of their children, but to the fact that keeping a child safe is not always within a parent's power.

Some of them will likely blame themselves. We students owe it to the students who were killed to let their parents know they are blameless. We owe it to

the Aggie parents

to let them know their children will not be forgotten.

We owe it to ourselves to continue to comfort these parents and each other.

Life carries few guarantees. Few indeed are those who escape loss completely, but the experience of comforting another in a time of loss makes loss more bearable and prepares us for future losses that are greater and closer. The parents of the lost Aggies can take comfort in knowing no school could have loved their children more, or grieved their loss more deeply, than Texas A&M.

ANN HART IS A SENIOR ENGLISH MAJOR.

As a fairly cynical college student, I have always believed dissenting opinions, even those criticizing the most beloved traditions, needed to be heard. As an opinion writer, I have written more than a few columns that were critical of Texas A&M University. But as an Aggie, I have never been so proud to be a student at such a supportive university and a member of this close knit family.

It has been inspiring that, during this trying time, the cries of grief and sobs of sorrow have not been interrupted by the harsh words of criticism. In the hours and days following the tragedy at the Bonfire site, every student responded appropriately with sympathy and sincerity. Eventually there will be talk of blame and criticism about the accident, but those kinds of thoughts are for a later time.

In the immediate aftermath of such a tragedy, there was no "Good Ag" or "Bad Ag." There was no such thing as a two-percent. One hundred percent of the student body came together, and every Aggie has been a good Aggie, demonstrating all those

lofty ideals

we pin on ourselves year-round. It is one of the saddest and truest clichés that it takes a tragedy to make you realize how petty your previous criticisms really are. Complaints about hazing or offensive behavior at cut mean absolutely nothing when lives have been lost and even more are filled with grief.

Wednesday, my thoughts about Bonfire were centered on the investigation of hazing at cut site. Thursday morning, as I stood among the tears and the early morning chill, my thoughts were only on the safety of those caught under stack.

Let the finger-pointing be put off — right now we need those fingers to help wipe away the tears.

ERIC DICKENS IS A JUNIOR ENGLISH MAJOR.

and family of our fallen Aggies are dealing with this enormous loss, because my friends are dearer to me than anything on this earth. This incident has made me realize everything I would want to tell them if I suddenly found out I would never see them again.

In this hectic college environment, it is so easy to lose touch with friends and family. Just today, I realized I haven't spoken to my best friend for nearly six weeks — so I called her. I urge everyone reading this to call a friend or family member they have fallen out of touch with and tell them how much they care for them.

Someone else has already said better what I am attempting to say. In the words of Garth Brooks, "If tomorrow never comes, will she know how much I loved her / is the love I gave her in the past gonna be enough to last, if tomorrow never comes."

Tragically, tomorrow will never come for twelve Aggies. I hope their spirits will live on in the friendships we will continue to share with one another.

JESSICA CRUTCHER IS A SOPHOMORE JOURNALISM MAJOR.

The Polo Fields have been watered with the tears of all Aggies. Bonfire has fallen and this great tradition may be retired. Since Thursday morning, everyone's reactions have flowed out and they have all been different. Some have found comforting arms. Some have found anything to blame. Everyone has looked for closure.

In twenty years

our children will look at the memorial, whatever form it will take, and ask the questions we are asking now. Why did this happen? Why us?

We will carry these answers branded across our souls until we have passed them on for generations to come.

We have no answers now. All we know is how important tradition is to the students who have spent their time, and now their lives, to construct Bonfire. We only know their deaths will be memorialized and our questions will be hard to answer.

But we must answer them. After the pain has slowly ebbed, answer the questions that are defining our time. Now, the events are too large and jagged to hold within our hearts. But before our children ask those terrible questions, we must find our own answers and our own hope for tomorrow.

CHRIS HUFFINES IS A SENIOR SPEECH COMMUNICATION MAJOR.

The torrent of emotion came to me the moment everyone rose to stand at the memorial's closing. As I looked down, wildly blinking tears from my eyes and swallowing all the hurt and sorrow down into one overwhelming knot, I saw University President Dr. Ray Bowen. He was down on the floor, hugging each person on the front row like a long-lost family member. With each clutching embrace he seemed to say, "I don't know what to do either, but we'll be in this together."

Bowen's actions reflect the way the entire University has responded to this terrible tragedy.

No matter how tired or strained the University officials have felt or looked, they handled themselves with dignity, showing the utmost concern for the students.

Almost everyone involved has helped out in every way possible, from 2:28 a.m. on Nov. 18 to the present. University officials had a great deal to do with how well information was relayed from the site to mournful Aggies and their families at home, watching the news and waiting by the phones for the latest update about their son or daughter.

It was Bowen and his colleagues who kept refocusing everyone on the task at hand — finding the injured — rather than allowing press members to turn Thursday into a frenzied witch-hunt for the cause of the accident.

official decision

to close the memorial, so that our Aggie family could mourn together without having to worry about being surrounded by members of the press corps.

Nothing Bowen or any of the other University officials can say will alleviate the pain we are feeling or bring back the twelve we lost.

But by keeping the focus on Aggies, they have allowed us a start.

BEVERLY MIRELES IS A JUNIOR SOCIOLOGY MAJOR.

Friday night it finally hit me. I returned to my apartment after visiting the Bonfire site and found myself crying. Through my tears, one thought entered my mind — "turn to God." I was not the only student who did.

On Thursday, thousands of students sought comfort from God at memorial services, prayer vigils on and off campus and through friends and family. Students asked

for God's help

while they felt helpless, turning to the only one who could provide an anchor in the midst of the storm.

Clay Humphreys, a junior aerospace engineering major, spent much of this semester working on Bonfire and on Sunday mornings he held a "Cut Church" in the Albertson's parking lot.

He and others offered a devotional time for anyone who wanted to come, pray and learn about Jesus before going to Bonfire. One of his friends, Jerry Self, died when Bonfire fell Thursday.

"Cut Church has prayed that the men and women of Bonfire would experience God," Humphreys said. "Today they did. My friend Jerry Self would rejoice in the fact that people are experiencing God as a result of his tragic death."

Almost 2,000 years ago, Jesus Christ told his disciples, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27).

Jesus said these words knowing he was about to be arrested, beaten and crucified. He experienced one of the most painful deaths possible. If anyone can understand the pain we are experiencing right now, it is He. My faith in Jesus has been comforting me through this ordeal. He provides the hope that death does not have to mean the end of life, but the beginning of eternity.

STEPHANIE DUBE IS A JOURNALISM GRADUATE STUDENT.

I remember fondly first stepping onto campus in 1993. I was accosted by strange people who continuously hounded me with "Howdys." After entering as an undergraduate transfer student in 1994, I soon found myself saying those same strange sounding words to everyone walking past. It was then I knew I was an Aggie.

My first Silver Taps was amazing. I had heard about the tradition, but words cannot do justice to the emotion evoked by the

powerful, moving

event. Knowing that so many took the time to remember their Aggie brothers and sisters made me proud.

And, somehow Muster topped Silver Taps.

Knowing that all around the world Aggies were meeting to fulfill their sense of duty, devotion and love to one another still makes my heart swell.

Truthfully, I've missed some Silver Taps since I've been here. I have even missed one Muster.

Never again. I will always be there to remember. Every April 21 for the rest of my days, I will softly call the Muster.

But more importantly, from today on, I will never let people forget how much I care.

Events such as these leave us with the unfortunately needed reminder that words often go unspoken that can never be made up.

So please, each of you, join me in telling each other how much you care.

You may never again have the opportunity.

To my friends and family, I love you dearly. Thank you for all you have been to me.

MARC GRETHAR IS A MATHEMATICS GRADUATE STUDENT.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound." At that moment, the Aggie spirit became tangible. It was the heaviness in your heart, the tears rolling down your cheeks and the emotion that traveled through our linked arms. "This is why I go to school here," a student said as he exited the memorial service.

These bonds of Aggie spirit have remained amazingly strong on the Quadrangle, where the air of tragedy has been especially thick. Eight of the victims wore the Corps uniform. The sudden and unexpected loss of eight friends and others injured tested cadets' ideals of camaraderie, unselfish service and loyalty to all Aggies.

As soon as news reached the arches, the dorms began emptying out immediately. I saw cadets armed with pliers and pots sprinting to the Polo Fields from the

Corps of Cadets

Guardroom, where I was taking phone calls. For the five hours I was there, I spoke with dozens of sometimes hysterical parents, telling many that we had no information on their child. I have never felt so helpless in my life.

As the day continued, the more I learned, the sooner I wanted to wake up. I did not fully absorb the reality of the tragedy until the memorial, when I saw a group of cadets on the floor put their arms around each other, and then, watched the entire arena join them.

At that moment, everything I took in that morning was purged in a heavy stream of tears.

I looked around at the 20,000 students in attendance and remembered that I was surrounded by the brightest, bravest, most select college students in the nation. As the Rev. Larry Krueger said, it does not matter if you are a cadet or not, we've all come together and we all bleed maroon.

MARIANO CASTILLO IS A SOPHOMORE INTERNATIONAL STUDIES MAJOR.

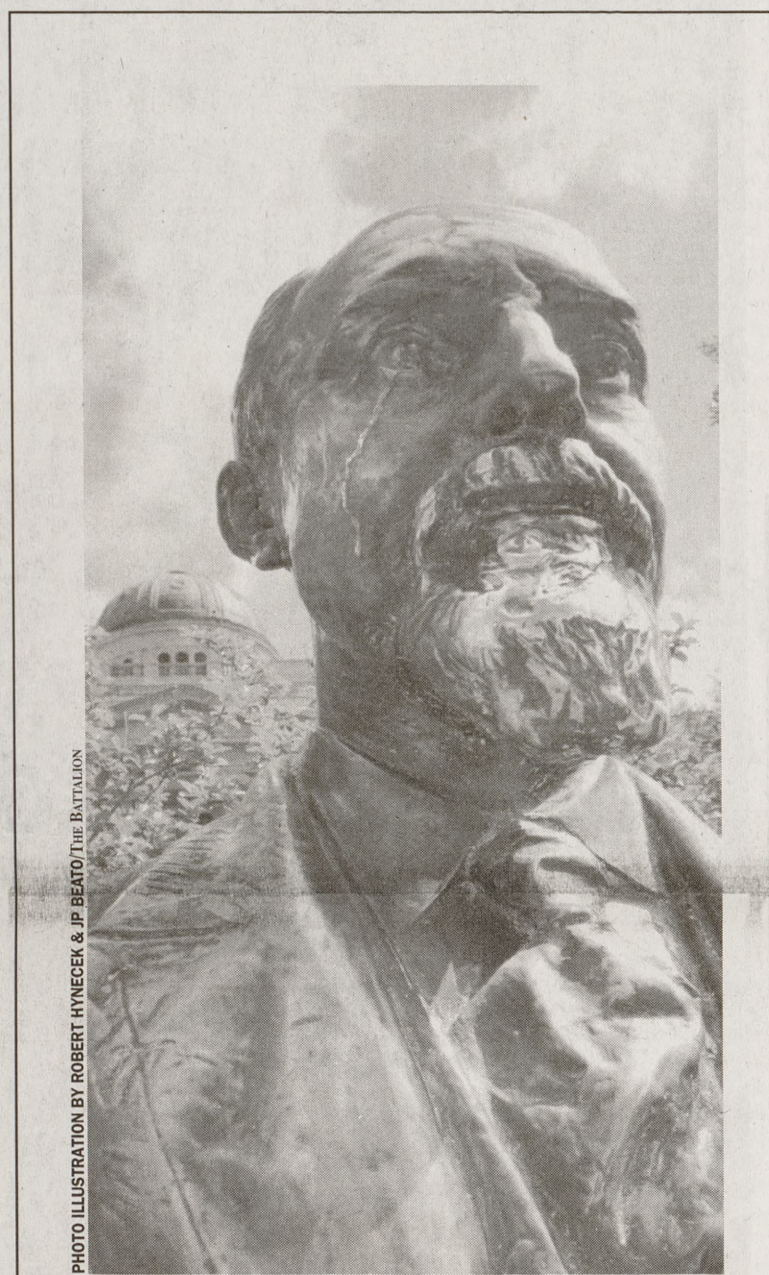


PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY ROBERT HYNCEK & JIP BEATO/The Battalion

REFLECTIONS and remembrances

Walking toward the Bonfire site on Thursday, my heart dropped with every step. A steady flow of people were silently and purposefully headed in the same direction, and disbelief seemed to fall on us all when the structure finally came into view.

An air of helplessness was covering the several hundred mourners already surrounding the perimeter with a unity and sorrow yet to be lifted from the site.

On Thursday, groups of people huddled together for comfort, and individuals sat quietly watching the logs being removed one at a time.

Many prayed and a few brought musical instruments, but everyone was there to show support.

Seemingly passing through the crowd, every man and woman who had ever worked on Bonfire was heading to the volunteer area. After hours of manually transporting logs from the crane to designated piles, rescue efforts progressed and volunteers were sent to the perimeter — left to

watch as heavy machinery took over dismantling what they worked so hard to create. As darkness moved in, efforts continued and the temperature began to drop at the site.

Aggies displayed initiative and even more support by bringing sweatshirts, and the community sent food and water for the hundreds still anxiously waiting for the rescue teams to find everyone.

Eventually the last log was removed and the last Aggie accounted for. Sorrowfully the crowd began to thin, but it has yet to dissipate. Despite how little is now left to see at

the Bonfire site

people continue to journey to it. An orange mesh fence was erected around the area. Touching notes, cards and flowers have been left and, after reading just a few, I found it hard to keep a dry eye.

Though my heart has been crushed by the tragedy, it swells with pride when I consider the character displayed by all present at the site of Bonfire '99.

ELIZABETH KOHL IS A JUNIOR ACCOUNTING MAJOR.