Today we come together with heavy hearts for the students, staff, and faculty at our sister institution, Virginia Tech. Our prayers go out to the families of those who lost loved ones in the horrific events of yesterday. Many of us have friends at Virginia Tech and have heard from them through emails and phone calls.

I am linked to Virginia Tech more directly than most of you, since I was on the faculty there and my family lived in Blacksburg for a decade. My family spent many days on the campus of Virginia Tech, and my son and daughter-in-law are graduates of the university. We are all in a state of shock that this beautiful campus, set in the small college town of Blacksburg, could be the scene of such a heinous crime. I was saddened to learn recently that one of the faculty killed yesterday was someone I had helped hire. And I have spoken with many of my Blacksburg friends yesterday and today. They are devastated that this could happen on their campus.

When I was dean of engineering at Virginia Tech, my offices were on the third floor of Norris Hall, just one floor above the classrooms where yesterday, unbelievably, thirty people were killed. I remember Norris Hall as a place of learning and vitality, where faculty and students met and shared the joy of teaching and research. It is incomprehensible that so many innocent people lost their lives doing what comes so naturally on a college campus, and fulfilling the mission and purpose for which a university was created. I will be forever saddened by what has happened, and we should do all we can to reach out to those touched by this tragedy.

The intrusion of such harsh events on a beautiful university campus shakes us to our core. Yet it reminds us that our own lives are precious and fragile, and that each day we should seek to help those around us. Only last week we held our “When the Whistle Blows” ceremony for those who died within the past year while active at Georgia Tech as student, faculty or staff members. We celebrated the lives of twelve who left us, but who helped make our Tech community whole while they lived.

Just yesterday I was at a meeting on our campus where a group of our students talked about the fulfillment they had experienced from using their Tech education and programs to help others in countries far less fortunate than ours. Their message was uplifting, and I felt proud that Georgia Tech had opened doors for these students to use their abilities to noble ends, and that our students had brought the positive spirit of our community to people half way around the world.

In spite of the sadness of loss that has come to us yesterday, and yet may come if other friends or loved ones pass from us, we know that they would have it no other way than for us to use the opportunities we have to make life better for others. As Abraham Lincoln said, “It is not the years in your life that are important, but the life in your years.” Even as the tragedy at Virginia Tech is a reminder that life is fragile, it should also teach us to fill what years we have with a life well spent.