

opinion

Column/Thomas T. Huang

On the students we have lost

MIT: listen to me for just a moment.

I remember returning from classes to my dormitory on a cold day in February, 1983, and hearing that a resident had committed suicide. People told me that he had hung himself in his room. They told me about how the ambulance came down Amherst Alley to take his body away.

I didn't know him very well. When I met him the fall before, my first impression was that he could probably cut me in two with a karate chop, but he turned out to be quite a gentle, quiet person. He was a young, athletic black man who liked writing. Sometimes he would wear something that looked like an American Indian headdress of feathers. Often he would make amusing comments at study breaks.

I didn't realize that he was having problems. I didn't know him very well, and I didn't take the time out of my classes and other activities to change that fact.

As a freshman, I couldn't understand why an upperclassman might take his or her own life. It seemed to me that freshmen were the ones who were undergoing great changes and new pressures. Even with the pass/fail grading system, freshman year jolted me and then drained some life from me.

On the other hand, I believed that upperclassmen had had the time to adjust to the pace of MIT life. I thought they could handle anything: longer hours of work, harder tests, less flexibility in late problem sets and papers.

MIT: I hope that, after the tragedies of the past year, you will come to realize that this is not so. Support and understanding — from counselors, professors, teaching assistants, house masters, floor tutors, and students themselves — should not be reserved for freshmen.

For, as Stephanie Harriston-Diggs, assistant dean for student affairs, explained in an interview in the October issue of *The Graduate Student News*, upperclassmen — particularly seniors — face immense pressures. Seniors stand at the crossroads. They are about to leave their friends. They have to tackle career decisions. Will they be able to get that job? Will they be able to get into graduate school? Once in graduate school, will they be able to pass their qualifying examinations?

Upperclassmen and graduate students face the unknown. If they can't see the future, they think they have come to the end of the road. Perhaps a loved one has abruptly left their lives. Perhaps a career opportunity has suddenly vanished. Perhaps a door has been closed. Young people just don't have the experience of years that tells them there are many, many doors in a life.

MIT: I'm warning you that the number of suicides in the past year ought not be treated as some "glitch." I'm warning you that these suicides ought not be considered as isolated, pathological cases of mentally unstable students. For callous statements like these are just denials of the fact that some students do get lost and confused in the grind — denials of the responsibility we as a community must take in looking after them.

MIT: You leave very little room for failure or self-doubt or exhaustion. Possibly this confinement is wrought by the students, but you do little to steer us away from the misguided view that overachievement is a healthy way of life.

MIT: You seem to expect students to be supermen and superwomen. We are not. We freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors, and graduate students are simply young men and women who are still growing up, who still don't quite understand what the hell is going on. You should expect us to fail just as you expect us to succeed.

Yes, you and I, we're all busy, and we all have our own problems, and with every day it gets harder to listen to each other, and who can really tell when a student is on the verge of self-destruction?

But MIT: Were you and I then still too busy to grieve for the lost? Are we supposed to grow accustomed to the cadence of student suicides, treat it as mere noise in the background, and go on with our lives as if nothing has changed?

On Sunday, Oct. 5, 1986, Randy Wei '87 took his own life.

At some time between Oct. 15 and 17, 1986, Dan O'Day '87 took his own life.

On Friday, Oct. 2, 1987, Jeffrey Liebman '88 took his own life.

On Saturday, Oct. 3, 1987, Kent Anderson G took his own

life.

On Friday, Oct. 16, 1987, in their Mattapan apartment, next to the still body of their eight-month-old child, former graduate students Sam Amponsah SM '79 and Melanie Amponsah were found dead.

And yesterday, in the basement of his house in Somerville, Tom Trobaugh G joined the universal silence.

Thomas T. Huang G, a student in the department of electrical engineering and computer science, is a former editor in chief of The Tech.