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To the Editor:

Seeing "Invictus" on the front page of today's paper was particularly surprising to me because I had quoted its last four lines this past weekend at a religious retreat.

As a teen-ager, these lines helped teach me self-reliance and provided me strength and motivation. What could be more inspiring than knowing that "I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul"? It gave me a sense that my destiny was in my hands.

This poem also helped give me the courage of my convictions, and the commitment to follow them no matter what. "It matters not how strait the gate, how charged with punishments the scroll." You do what you believe in, even if it is difficult, even if you have to suffer the consequences.

Those are the positive effects of the poem. But the poem also has a dark side, which is why I abandoned it many years ago.

If you put too much faith in its message of self-reliance, you develop no sense of belonging, no sense of community. You don't feel that you are linked to other people, except perhaps those in your small circle. So the implications of your actions for other people have little importance to you.

From reading only this poem you can also come to believe that you are the center of the universe. The first commitment of a person who claims to be religious or moral is to recognize that you are not God, and that endangering other people, much less killing them, is not something that you are allowed to do, no matter how strong your convictions.

Without these restraints, you end up believing that the world revolves around you, and that other people are irrelevant. And then killing a few people, or even a few hundred, simply doesn't matter to you. It was foolish to expect remorse or repentance from Timothy McVeigh.

Some observers noted that looking into McVeigh's eyes they saw Satan. They were mistaken. What they saw was a person who in some bizarre sense believed that he was God.

"Invictus" means "unconquerable". Unfortunately, we played into his hands. By killing him we gave him the victory he sought - we enabled him to die with head "unbowed".

Joseph G. Rosenstein