

Where Do We Go From Here? -- response to Sandy Hook tragedy

One week ago today, on the morning that twenty-eight people lost their lives in Newtown Connecticut, Dec. 14, 2012, I was meeting with an Occupational Medicine physician, sharing experiences and things I have come to believe in over 22 years of developing and implementing violence prevention tools and strategies in our local Public Health department. He told me that many of the workplaces he interacts with voice concerns and questions about how to keep their employees and customers safe. We talked about work we have done to develop violence-free, respectful work environments, and I shared with him my belief that most security systems and approaches are to a large degree a waste of time and money, unless they are applied 100% - in other words, placing guards and metal detectors at *some* entrances, and/or only screening *some* people (i.e. checking visitors and customers but letting employees and others through unchecked) leaves far too many holes for someone determined to do harm, and willing (perhaps wishing?) to die themselves. Soon after our conversation ended and he left my office, I heard the paralyzing news about Sandy Hook School.

It is now one week since twenty-eight people, mostly small beautiful children, brutally died in Newtown. In this time we have started local and national discussions about what to do next, how we might prevent such unspeakable violence from occurring again. There are calls to examine the availability of guns and ammunition, to fix our broken (largely non-existent?) mental health system, and to address violence in media. Today, the NRA proposed that we have armed guards at every school in our country to confront the monsters who would kill our children. I want to believe that each of these proposals, whether I agree with them or not, are being proposed from a sincere wish to prevent another tragedy like Sandy Hook, or Columbine, or Virginia Tech, or Aurora, or....

The discipline of Public Health is based on the premise that in order to effectively prevent or respond to a threat to human health, we must begin by understanding the cause of the threat, whether a disease or behavior. Following this inquiry, we design strategies based on “best practice”, implement them, evaluate their effectiveness, and make modifications for improvement along the way based on the results achieved. We have used this approach to develop effective violence prevention tools and strategies in our local Public Health Department, many of which are now recognized as “best practice” and are being implemented in communities around the country. As I have tried to determine what to say and think about Newtown, a few of the key lessons from our work seem to stand out:

1. When trying to develop effective prevention and intervention strategies for complex issues such as violence, do not look for *the thing* to do - instead, find things you *can* do now that have intellectual integrity and community support, put them into place, and as described above, monitor and improve these efforts over time – always with the vision of sustained, community-owned change, as opposed to a one-time project or event. None of the strategies being discussed in the wake of Newtown will “work” instantaneously, nor in isolation, but that is not an argument to not pursue and take action on multiple fronts.
2. As we consider the core question facing us, which is how to prevent acts of violence, we need to start from a common understanding of *why violence occurs*. In the Violence Prevention field, this remains a contentious question, and one that surely does not have a simple, “correct” answer. Is

violence caused by the availability of guns and high-volume magazines, created to the sole purpose of killing other people? Is it caused by inadequate/ineffective security systems? By people struggling with mental health problems? By continuous, ever-increasing bombardments of violent images and messages in media? There is surely some truth in each of these, and when added together they start to give us a better sense of what we are dealing with.

3. I would though, add a few more pieces to this puzzle which I have not heard mentioned much in the past week:
 - Psychologist Rollo May said *“Acts of violence in our society are performed largely by those seeking to establish their self-esteem, to defend their self image, and to demonstrate that they, too, are significant...violence arises not out of power, but out of powerlessness”*;
 - Dr. James Gilligan, reflecting on his 25 years of work as the head of the Massachusetts state prison psychiatry system, says *“A person will act out violently when they are overwhelmed by a sense of shame and humiliation”*;
 - Child psychologist Dr. James Garbarino says: *“All people have three fundamental needs – Stability, Security and Affirmation”*;
 - Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said: *“The real problem of our existence lies in the fact that we ought to love one another, but do not”*; and
 - Author and activist Barbara Deming wrote: *“A liberation movement that is nonviolent sets the oppressor free as well as the oppressed.”*

Finally, the book [A General Theory of Love](#) (authors Thomas Lewis, M.D.; Fari Amini, M.D.; Richard Lannon, M.D.) establishes that as humans, our fundamental biology and wiring demonstrates that we all are in fact connected, and that to survive and thrive we need to give and experience love. This is not 1960's counter-culture stuff; this is science.

In 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. published his last full-length book, titled [Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?](#) In his final public speech, the night before he was assassinated, he said “I may not get there with you, but I want you to know...that we as a people will get to the Promised Land.” I believe that the title of Dr. King's book, and these prophetic words, frame the question that lies before us: where do we go from here, and what is the Promised Land that we seek? Based on what I have learned and experience in my life and my work, my answer is clear:

1. **We can and must end the sale and availability of weapons of mass human destruction.** We must stop arming ourselves with technologies created for the sole purpose of slaughtering large numbers of people painfully and rapidly. People do not need automatic weapons and ammunition designed for maximum lethality to go hunting, nor to defend themselves.
2. **We can and must invest in research and practice/system improvements to assure all people have access to support and help in understanding and healing from struggles with their mental health.**

3. **We can and must change our media and social environments to stop glorifying and teaching violence and hatred** - in particular we must curb the sale and use of point and shoot video games, which were designed for the sole purpose of desensitizing and training soldiers and law enforcement to be able to shut off innate human prohibitions for killing one another.

4. **We can and must each take responsibility, individually and collectively, to reconnect with our selves and one another.** This is neither silly nor trivial – this is based on understanding and responding to our basic, core need as humans for connection. Think of what we hear about most every child of our community who has ended up going out and doing monstrous things: they were outcasts, they were isolated, alone with their demons and their computer games – in other words, powerless and disconnected. We each have the ability and responsibility to connect with others in an authentic, human manner. I believe this is the single most crucial and most doable step each of us can, and must undertake, to stem the horrific tide of cruelty and death gripping our families, communities, and nation.

Finally, in response to today's NRA proposal to have armed security guards at every school in the United States: I want to believe that this is a genuine, caring proposal in response to the horror of Newtown, and not a cynical attempt to preserve their power and increase weapons sales throughout the country. Returning to Dr. King's book and his vision of The Promised Land, all I can say is that a world of metal detectors and schools with armed police and security guards is not a vision or world I wish to live in, not a world my soul could live in. Remember that in order for this approach to work, every person – every child, employee, parent and visitor would need to be subject to full inspection every time they enter a school, and every police officer and guard would need to be fully skilled, trustworthy and ready at a second's notice to shoot to kill. I do not believe this is a vision of a world or teaching environment where our children could learn and grow into healthy, caring adults.

As the Occupational Medicine physician and I discussed last Friday, as the slaughter in Newtown was happening unbeknownst to us, there is danger in the world and in life. We need to try to rationally understand and prevent harm to ourselves and others as best we can. We must do this while building community and homes that allow us to live out our lives and connect with other people. I believe the four points listed above, worked on collectively, would move us more intentionally toward where we all want to go from here, and would go a long way toward protecting our children, those who we most love and cherish. I so hope we will find the courage and clarity to move forward as people and communities, in respect for and memory of all of those who have suffered and died.