



Sometimes people who are hurting hurt people: Talking to my children about the Tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary

by

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I was away from home when the tragedy took place at Sandy Hook Elementary Connecticut Friday, December 14, 2012 and I first learned of the tragedy unfolding early in the day; it was too much to process. By the early afternoon as I sat in the airport watching and listening in horror, I could not stop the tears. My mind jumped from my experience in schools and to all the principals and teachers and schools like Sandy Hook that I had been in and worked with. We work to make schools that are safe to learn, where there is a culture of respect and trust. In the face of this tragedy, I honestly didn't know—and don't know—what to say to the teachers and to schools just yet. I don't know what the takeaway is, what the deeper solution is—beyond vigilance and additional security.

All I could think was, “what will I say to our kids?” How will we explain this to them? How will we help them face the brutal truths of this tragedy, without scarring them or scaring them? What follows is what I wrote as I tried to think about what my wife and I will say when we talk about this later today. It draws from my experience as a psychologist working with schools on developing character, and working with youth in at-risk environments, but it is written as I will speak it—as a father, to my family and to my kids. I share it not as the only way to talk to your kids, but one way, our way. We have four children, 3 girls and one boy, ranging in age from 5-10. They attend a school that looks like Sandy Hook in many ways; it's a safe school in a good community. I hope that in sharing others who are struggling to make sense of this for themselves might find something useful, something helpful as we try to move forward from this tragedy. What you say to younger kids might be different; how much you include might vary; what you ultimately decide to say to your children might be very, very different. But I believe you must say something. You must help them make sense of it.

Dear Kids,

Dad and Mom have some very sad news to share with you. It's hard for us to even find the words to say what we have to say. Something terrible happened today. A young man in Connecticut who was very troubled got into an elementary school and used a gun to shoot and kill 20 students and 7 teachers. Mom and I wish more than anything that this had never happened, and that we didn't even have to tell you about it. But it did happen, and you will hear about it on the news and you will hear kids talking about it and we wanted you to hear it from us.

I know that you're probably feeling sad in your heart, that your tummy may feel a little sick—that's how Mommy and I feel too. We feel so sad for the people who were killed and for their families and friends. We feel angry that that bad things happen and that people hurt other people. We feel scared because we don't want anything to happen to you. It's okay to feel all those things and we need to keep talking about how we're feeling. You need not worry about those who died. We have no doubt that they are at peace in God's loving arms. We really need to pray for the parents and families in this community, that they can have courage and strength, that in time they can heal and find peace in their hearts, that they can forgive and let go of the anger they feel right now.

You probably are wondering **why would somebody do something so terrible and hurt people like this man did?** The truth is, we really don't know why this man, or any person would do something terrible like this to others. But, this young man is obviously sick—not sick like with cancer or diabetes, but sick with a mental illness in his heart and in his head and in his soul. Sometimes people with this kind of mental illness can be so sad or angry or depressed that they do terrible things like this young man did. You know how at school, if you somebody does something to you it can make you angry? This young man suffers from a different kind of anger. Nobody at this school did anything wrong, or anything to make him angry. He was mad at everybody and he probably wasn't even sure why. Remember how we talk about the idea that "hurt people, hurt people," that people who have suffered or are suffering often hurt others? This young man was hurting, and he hurt others. It doesn't make it right, but it can help us to understand why. We can be so angry with him for hurting so many innocent people, but we can also understand that he was a sick man and that sometimes people who are hurting, hurt other people.

You may be wondering **why people couldn't tell that this man was angry and that he was going to hurt others?** Well, you know how in the movies, when something bad is going to happen and the light gets dark and the music gets scary? You just know that something bad is going to happen. Unfortunately, when someone is sick like this man and they're angry and they plan to do something bad, it's a lot harder to tell. This young man was probably sick and suffering in his heart for a long time. Unfortunately, when you're sick like he was, it's harder for others to see it and harder for him to get the help he needs. That's why you need to **be kind AND careful**: you need to be kind to everyone because you don't know what kind of pain and suffering they have on the inside, and you don't know how your small act of kindness might help them. But you need to be careful. There are bad people in the world, and they can be around our home, your school, or at the mall.

You're probably wondering **if you're safe and if this couldn't happen at your school or in our community?** The truth is that something like this could happen anywhere. So we always have to be careful. You have to keep your eyes and ears open and look out for people and situations that look dangerous. It's just like crossing the street by our house: remember how we tell you, "our road isn't busy, but it only takes one car driving too fast and one kid not paying attention and we could have a tragedy." We still let you ride your bikes. We still let you chase down the balls that go across the street. It's not dangerous, but you have to pay attention. It's the same at your school. You're safe. Your teachers work so hard to make you safe. They have security and cameras and they work with parents to keep you safe. But you still need to be careful.

You may be wondering **what you would do if that happened at your school?** We don't think it will ever happen here, but it's still good to be prepared. It's just like the fire drills you have at school: your school has never had a fire; we hope and pray you never will, but you still practice fire drills. So what can you do if you're in a situation like this: first, stay calm and don't panic! You must stay calm so you can think and listen. Don't scream and yell; think and listen. If adults are there you listen and act on what they tell you to do. If they are not there, then you look for a way to get out of the building or away from the danger. If you can get out, go quickly away from the danger and look for a place or a person you can trust. If you cannot get out of the building or away from the danger, look for a safe corner to hide, something to get below like a table or into like a closet. Stay low, stay quiet, and stay calm and wait for someone you can trust to come to you. You may have to wait a long time, but just be calm and patient, someone will come for you.

It's a very sad time in a very joyous season. This is a very difficult and painful situation. Mom and Dad are heartbroken that this has happened and that you have to know about something this awful. We wish there were no bad people in the world. We wish that nobody was suffering from hunger or poverty, from war or violence, abuse or neglect of any kind. We wish that every child was safe and that every person was happy. But unfortunately, that's not the way the world is. But, we can be aware and be on guard and we can be careful. We can also be kind to others always and work hard to make sure that we help everyone, especially those who are hurting. We can pray for those who are sick and remember that everybody is struggling with something.

Remember, that while there are bad people in the world, most people are good. Choose to spend your life working to be kind and make things better for others. The prayer of Saint Francis is one that can help us make sense of this tragedy—for the man who killed, for those he killed, and for those of us who must live in the aftermath of this awful event. It speaks to how we want you to live, how we all need to live so that we can heal from this tragedy and begin making a world where hatred is replaced by peace. Let's say the words together--not just with our lips, but truly in our hearts:

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.
Where there is injury, pardon.
Where there is doubt, faith.
Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is darkness, light.
Where there is sadness, joy.
O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive.
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.*