Looking Back to More Clearly See the Present

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As I sat in a circle of university students discussing and researching gun violence, the topic of active shooter drills arose. Students began to share memories of the drills they had experienced, several speaking critically of specific methods used, while others shared stories tinged with humor about apparently oxymoronic structures in their experiences. As the discussion continued, though, it began to grow more serious. Two students shared that they had friends at schools in which shootings had taken place. They talked about their fears and anxiety in not knowing how their friends were at the time. Another student quietly offered that his brother had been killed by gun violence, although not at school. The emotional depth of those contributions set in, and the room grew very quiet.

Reaching into the student disclosures, I suddenly realized, given that the Columbine school shooting occurred in 1999, none of them had ever gone to school without the existence of an active shooter as a possibility that loomed beyond and within them. When I shared this with them, they seemed surprised that I wouldn't already be aware of it, just as one would be aware, perhaps, of a birthmark that had always existed on one's arm. When I asked them how they felt about this, the reactions ranged widely. Suddenly, Noah looked at me thoughtfully and asked quietly what it was like to have been in school when atomic weapons drills took place.

I hadn't thought about it in many years and started to admit that I wasn't sure I remembered much, that it really hadn't affected me. But their openness and candor spurred me to dig more deeply into those memories. I remembered the quiet in the classroom and the smell of the oiled wooden floors, while I squatted under my desk, hands behind my head. I remembered that I could no longer see anyone in the classroom except bits of the student directly to my right and left. The position itself, bent double in a cramped area, was uncomfortable, and I wished the whole process would be over quickly. I didn't feel particularly afraid during these practice sessions. I was young, in the early grades of school, and my teachers didn't make much of an issue over it, although they demanded strict silence. At one of the drills, I remember Rex, always the class clown, sharing a snarky comment, and all of us laughing. Unfortunately, this only led to our teacher having us do the drill all over again to demonstrate our ability to pull it off correctly. Several of us were not pleased with Rex at that point.

As I moved into upper elementary grades, we just stopped having those drills. I never knew why, although I suspected it had something to do with my father's often heard joke about the drills. "Just bend down, put your head between your legs, and kiss your sweet ass good-bye," he'd laugh. I always laughed too. We all did. But I also began to grow the realization that, since the Airforce base where my father worked was in our town, we would definitely be one of the most likely targets if atomic war broke out.

In middle school, I was full of early adolescent emotions and thoughts. My world had both grown bigger, with a new, larger school bringing new friends and acquaintances, while simultaneously shrinking, given my new-found penchant for clothes and the social ramifications of events happening around me. On an almost perfect October afternoon, we were taking full advantage of the sunny warmth and

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falling leaves before our Girl Scout meeting started at the Woodruff's farm. Small groups of girls wondered around, giggling, gossiping, and occasionally jumping in piles of leaves. Jill was the last to arrive, coming from her Catholic school, which was further away than our public one.

My group ran over to her as she descended the bus steps, laughing over Barb's burlesque attempt to fake a broken leg when she landed in some leaves. Jill's face stopped us in our tracks before we even reached her. Her sense of humor was one of the driving forces in our group. She was frequently the first to look at something and turn it around slightly with a dry comment, sending even our Scout leaders into laughter. But on that day, her face was tight and her eyes large as she walked toward us. I was sure someone had died and braced myself to try to comfort her.

"We spent the whole afternoon in chapel," she announced in a dead tone. I waited for one of her wry witticisms to follow about the Catholic addiction to kneeling, but instead she just looked at each of us for a response. We had none.

"Why?" someone finally asked.

"Didn't you hear?" Jill asked in disbelief. "We're probably going to have a war with Russia. They have atomic weapons they're putting in Cuba directed at us."

I don't think I watched President Kennedy's address to the nation in October of 1962. I was probably busy with homework or, more likely, on the phone to a friend. My parents hadn't talked about it, although I know they watched it. I also knew my father frequently had classified information and never really talked much about work. When I arrived home after the Scout meeting, I told them what Jill had said and asked them if it was true. They answered my questions honestly and without much emotion, simply giving me the facts to my questions. It felt reassuring that they were not showing much fear or anxiety, although it was also clear that they knew the situation was serious. Later that night, after I went to bed, I heard them talking. I couldn't hear the words, but I remember the worry in my mother's voice and my father's tones trying to reassure. And I was suddenly, deeply frightened.

In high school, my life began to stretch out beyond school walls. I was active in many extracurricular activities but chiefly two: the drama club that put on school plays and a fraternal organization for girls. By then, the Airforce base had become home to the 17th Bombardment Wing, which had absorbed several other squadrons and was tasked with maintaining abilities in strategic bombing as well as aerial refueling globally. One part of the readiness drills for this group was to take off at various unannounced times of the day and night. Driving past that part of the airbase, you could see the huge B-52 bombers lined up on the long runway ready for their sequenced take off on a minute's notice. Beyond them, the KC-135 aerial refueling tankers loomed. I knew by that point that the goal was to be able to get the bombers and tankers into the air within minutes, before an atomic bomb could land.

The noise as they went airborne was so great that it became impossible to hear anything else. It was the worst when I was at a meeting in Fairborn with that branch of the fraternal order, but it also affected play rehearsals at my high school on a regular basis. You could hear, and sometimes feel, a loud rumbling first as the planes started their engines. The earsplitting noise would follow, and everything would come to a stop. People at the meeting simply stopped trying to talk. Those involved in play rehearsals would often just sit down on the stage and wait for it to pass.

For the most part, we seemed to take it for granted. It was just something that happened once or twice a day. Some of us would make jokes about it. Someone at play rehearsals would inevitably jump up and begin pantomiming their lines in an exaggerated manner, inevitably sending most of the cast and crew into laughter. But

I don't remember any of us ever talking about it. Every now and then, we'd need to explain what was happening to a new person or teacher, but even that was done in a simple, straightforward manner. We perceived ourselves as worldly, and this was the way our world was.

But I was also older then; and the effects of all of the accumulated experiences and bits of knowledge that had preceded this point in my life took a toll. The problem was that you never knew if it was the real thing or a drill. I remember that very thought running through my teenage mind each time the planes took off. If it happened while I was driving past them, I would race to get home, no doubt breaking speed limits. I didn't want to be in my car by myself if it were real. I also remember worrying about my father if he was at work at the time. If I was away from home, I often found myself just wanting to go home that minute. But I also remember that same fear slowly maneuvering its way up from the pit of my stomach even if I were at home. At those times, I would actively turn to logic, pushing away from emotion, keeping the fear at bay. But the logic, although easier to handle than the emotions, told me that, if it was real, I was in a bad place geographically. In retrospect, I realize that I didn't feel safe even in what should have been my most comforting place, my home.

Remembering this fear makes me wonder why none of us ever discussed it. Were we too busy trying to be "cool?" Was I the only one who had this fear? Was it easier to ignore if we didn't talk about it? Would it have made the fear more real if we brought it up? Or, did we discuss it, and I have removed all of that from my memory?

I know I don't remember the subject ever arising with teachers at school. I don't remember any class discussions about it, even in my senior civics class, where we had weekly quizzes based on our reading of current events—at that time frequently focused on the Viet Nam War, which contained many aspects of the possibility of nuclear warfare.

As I look at the current anxiety over active shooters at our schools and the accompanying distress it brings to those who work with and in schools, I recognize that there are several very real differences between that and my experiences with the cold war. One of the primary discrepancies lies in who the "enemy" is—or might be. We knew, or at least thought we did, that if an atomic war broke out it would be started by Russia. It wasn't until much later that any other country had the capacity that we thought was there in Russia. We had a known enemy, and that enemy was far away. The enemy was the other, and we worked hard to keep him in that category. Even with nuclear missiles, there would be a stretch of time between the launch of the attack and the result. I knew, or thought I did, that if I were out of town at the time, I had better chances of weathering the attack. In fact, I distinctly remember researching where Knoxville, Tennessee was on the list of prioritized areas and feeling comforted when I realized that, if an attack happened while I was visiting my relatives there, we'd be much safer. I even felt comforted in knowing that we always brought our two pet dogs with us on those trips.

In contrast, school shooters are frequently known by the school community. Indeed, the shooter could be anyone, another student, a friend, someone who lives in the community, a child of one of the teachers. Anyone you attend school with could potentially try to bring weapons with the goal of killing others. And what is more, there is no known period of time in which to prepare for the attack, no planes (no matter how frightening) poised to defend the attack.

Another massive distinction between the two issues lies in the advent and accessibility of technology. My fear as a youth (or at least most of it) could have been quelled considerably with a quick check of a cell phone to see if this was a drill.

However, complications within the scope of technology would still potentially trouble the reality. As we saw recently in Hawaii, human error is possible in setting off a message that there is an imminent strike, even when that was not true. For almost 45 minutes, many Hawaiians labored under the belief that an actual strike was about to occur. Another very real problem is the growing lack of confidence in what is reported as news, as well as in those who have their "hands on the button." Even if our cell phone said take cover, many might wonder if it was real. A recent notification system drill at our university left many of my students unsure of the fact that it was a drill. Many immediately took to the internet to see if any information was available about our university. Indeed, after searching for a while, the thing that seemed to help calm them the most was my personal reassurance that we had been warned about the drill ahead of time. (And this was in spite of the fact that the university had sent a warning, and I had reminded them at the beginning of class that this would be occurring.)

Technology also brings with it the likelihood of seeing things over and over again. In fact, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to screen out things we don't want to see repeatedly. Whether through social or news media, we are frequently subjected to repeated footage when shootings of any type occur. In contrast, there were occasions in which a vision of a nuclear bomb detonating would appear on TV or in movies, but it was also possible to simply look away or choose another show. The effect of seeing repeated, emotionally jarring footage can both desensitize as well as feed terror. How many of us view Times Square on New Year's Eve with incidents like the Boston Marathon bombing or the Las Vegas concert mass shooting in the back of our mind?

Reflecting on all of this, I find one of the few similarities in both is the existence of drills—drills to lend comfort that we can keep our students safe. Yet, just as we came to find with atomic bomb drills, we realize that we cannot guarantee safety. I shake my head as I think of the bullet-proof "safe rooms" being developed within some classrooms. There are also accompanying drills in which the students are marched into the safe room and sealed behind bullet proof walls. Some have suggested making the safe room into a classroom reading area to eliminate fear in students. None of us can say for certain if this room would keep students safe, but I would posit that it will be hard to eliminate fear no matter how the room is used. Even as a child, I always thought the commercials showing families happily entering home bomb shelters and chatting cheerfully within the confines were ludicrous.

As I visit schools now and listen to my university students' reactions to their field placement experiences, I realize that there is a wide variance in how the shooter drills are held and what structures are enforced. The drills seem to encompass everything from crouching along walls in a locked classroom to throwing open all classroom doors as all students and teachers simply run as fast as they can to the nearest exit, convening in predesignated places outside the school.

My point, here, is not to critique specific methods of handling this challenge, nor even to suggest "answers" to the problem, but rather to encourage all of us involved with schools to think more deeply about the emotional reactions, or lack of them, in our students, and how we, ourselves, have reacted to experiences producing fear.

It strikes me that none of my memories, or their accompanying feelings and thoughts, had surfaced at any depth in me until my own students pressed me to respond. I sincerely thought that none of it had affected me. Noah's question, accompanied by the sincerity and candor of the students in thinking about their own experiences, served as the sole provocation in bringing these memories back. Nothing in my own life as an adult, nor in my life as a teacher leader had served that purpose until then.

As a former principal of an elementary and middle school, I found myself transfixed in horror in front of my TV as the shootings and aftermath at Sandy Hook Elementary School played out. The entire experience left me emotionally decimated as a I watched the footage, listened to the families who were affected, and heard the bits and pieces of the story as they became known. Like everyone else, I tried to wrap my mind and heart around how this could happen and what the effects would be. Yet, as I processed the events, even those horrific few days only served to make me replay over and over again in my mind what possible structures could be put in place to help assure safety. How might we best organize counseling in the aftermath of an event like this? How long should the school be closed? Should the school be torn down and a new one, perhaps even in a new location, be built in its stead? My heart ached for the adults and children, but I didn't at any point remember some of my own fears, nor let those guide me in thinking more deeply about what they might need. Instead, my reactions to their pain triggered logic from the things we know about trauma and the possible structures we might put in place to help with it.

As an educator, my concerns over active shooter drills have primarily focused on our youngest students. What will be the impact of drills on these emergent and curious minds? Are there ways in which we can conduct drills and keep them from being frightened? Listening to my university students' discussion, however, and reflecting on my own memories, I realize that we need to be just as concerned about our older students, who have had the impact of repeated experiences to shape their reactions and fears. I'm struck by the intellectual path this class (and others) took when they talk about their own drill experiences and reactions to gun violence. It seems to mirror my own, in that the first approach seems to consistently be logic (examining structures) and humor (sometimes, I'm sure, as a way of avoiding emotions we don't want to face). Like me, they seemed to simply think this is life, and this is what we do.

Last summer I had a chance meeting with a group of student activists from the Parkland School shooting. Their group, like several other groups, was traveling to various sites to talk with people about gun violence. The goal was not only to raise awareness, but to also stir action. And they clearly were not going to be happy with surface and structural answers. They wanted discussion that dove to the heart of the problem. They wanted it addressed systemically, moving to the core of the issue. They were also very comfortable, immediately after our informal introductions, in moving directly into discussing their own emotional reactions to the experience and then pushing us into the resulting conversation.

I wonder now if the difference in their response, their comfort in openly sharing their emotions and ideas, had to do with the fact that they have spent time talking with others about it. They have confronted their worst fears and anger and allowed themselves to acknowledge their own vulnerability. And they have practiced holding conversations about all of this on a frequent basis.

But this is not what we typically do in school. In fact, we increasingly spend little to no time encouraging students to think or talk about their individual conjectures and questions. I also can't help but wonder what effect the ever-increasing educational focus on fact-based, dictated curricula and our lack of open discussions in schools around very real, lived issues has on our students and future citizens. How can we begin to confront the most essential challenges in our lives if we never have the opportunity to grow skills that enable us to speak openly and vulnerably to each other and ourselves?

Giving my students the time to hold the conversation on their experiences with drills was not something I planned. My lesson plan for the day did not include students

emotionally sharing how frightened they were for friends in a school shooting. It certainly didn't include a student sharing about the death of his brother due to gun violence. Instead, that conversation sprang organically from the plans I had made. But if I had immediately steered the conversation back to my planned goals and activities, we never would have reached the place we did, both individually and as a community. The conversation never would have grown into the quiet sharing of emotions. And Noah never would have asked me the question that began my own journey in the first place.