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Sitting with grief

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NCR Today

Perhaps it is because my children are about the age of the 20 children who were killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. Or perhaps it is because I am only one degree of separation from one of the adult victims, Ann Marie Murphy, who was friends with one of my closest friends. But I've been overcome with sadness and grief over Friday's shooting--and bordering on obsessed with news coverage of it, despite how awful it makes me feel to read the details.

I was baking cookies with my sister and mom during our annual "Cookie Baking Weekend" on Friday when my sister checked her phone and announced there had been a school shooting. Ten dead. No, 20 dead. No, now possibly 30 dead. In Connecticut.

"What town?" I asked, thinking of the few folks I know in Connecticut.

When she said "Newtown," I froze. I address Christmas packages every year to Newtown, CT, sending gifts to my friend and her son, who is my godson. I'd been there, though it has been years. For a few hours, I searched frantically to find out if her children were OK. When I learned they were, I felt guilty for feeling relieved that at least the grief would not affect me as personally as it would for some.

It didn't help that I was far away from my own children, but I could not stop crying. Perhaps this is one of the curses of motherhood--you are forever connected to all other mothers throughout the world and throughout history, and cannot help but share in their pain and grief. President Obama referred to parents' universal fear in his words last night at a vigil in Newtown: "Someone once described the joy and anxiety of parenthood as the equivalent of having your heart outside of your body all the time, walking around. With their very first cry, this most precious, vital part of ourselves ? our child ? is suddenly exposed to the world, to possible mishap or malice."

What to do? Sign the petition to ban assault weapons? Join the chorus of voices calling for increased services for those with mental illness? Hug my kids a little tighter? Done, done and done.

But I'm having a hard time finding any spiritual solace yet. The president struck just the right tone of comfort and inspiration, as he quoted from 2 Corinthians and reminded us to "fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

A friend and colleague Jane Redmont also made her best attempt to reflect on the tragedy, after throwing away the sermon she had written before Friday:

You know that saying, "Everything happens for a reason"? What a load of theological hogwash that is. As if we could know. On an emotional and spiritual and theological level, we don't know. We need to sit, in Advent, in the night, in our not-knowing, the not-knowing in which faith is forged, the place where hope will be born?in this we trust?in the faint light of the rose and purple candles. But this will not happen fast or easily.

If there is one thing I have learned from my past experiences of grief, it's that you cannot rush it. So today I am still sitting with my small portion of the pain that others are experiencing thousandsfold. I do believe God is with me, and with them.

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