

Our stories matter because we matter: thoughts on the power of our voices

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I can't remember what I wanted for my fourteenth birthday, but I'm pretty sure "battery-operated socks" were not on the list. That November I got those fancy socks along with an Ocean Pacific wallet, a new belt buckle for my cowboy belt, and an AC/DC tape. My dad thought I'd love the socks because I always complained about my feet getting cold in the deer blinds.

I was raised in a hunting family. We weren't gun collectors or enthusiasts, but we hunted and we shot skeet so we had guns. And they were serious business in our house. We were all responsible for cleaning, loading, and storing our guns. By the time I was in high school I could probably take a gun apart and put it back together.

Because we hunted there was no need to fantasize about what a gun could do or rely on violent television shows for imagery, we knew exactly how it worked (plus, we weren't allowed to watch much besides Disney, Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom, and presidential debates).

There was absolute respect for hunting as a sport. We ate what we shot. Our family was to venison what Bubba Gump was to shrimp (chicken-fried, baked, sausage, jerky – you name it, we made it and ate it). My father had little tolerance for trophy hunting or any kind of "horseshit about playing around with super guns."

While I don't hunt anymore, I respect and appreciate the culture. I also fully support a ban on assault weapons and multi-magazine, combat-style weapons. I believe in criminal background checks and waiting periods. I write letters to my legislators and I give to The Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence. And, as a teacher, I absolutely do not support the idea of arming more people to stop the violence.

Like so many Americans, my experience doesn't align with the politics of either side. My story is not political – it's about family and culture. It's also deeply personal.

In 1989, my uncle – my mom's only sibling – was shot and killed in a random act of violence. My first response to the Sandy Hook shootings on Friday was prayer, not politics. I was very politically active when my uncle was killed so several people wrapped their sympathies in gun control arguments and it was devastating to me. I just wanted to be physically, emotionally, and spiritually held. I just wanted my pain and disbelief to be acknowledged.

Here are my five observations from the past couple of days:

Prayer and activism are not mutually exclusive.

For many of us they are inextricably connected. We don't need to criticize those who are praying. You don't have to pray or even believe in prayer, but be respectful (or at least quiet).

Politics is easier than grief.

To skip over feeling and rush to policy-making dehumanizes the process and weakens policy.

Blame is simply the discharging of pain and discomfort.

It has nothing to do with accountability. Accountability requires long, difficult, respectful conversations. Blame fizzles out with rage, where accountability is in for the long haul.

Self-righteousness is a sign of fear and uncertainty.

It has nothing to do with activism or change. The loudest and most vitriolic among us are often the most afraid. As my friend Harriet Lerner says, "Change requires listening with same level of passion that we feel when we speak."

You can't shame a nation into changing any more than you can shame a person into changing.

Shame is much more likely to be the source of destructive, violent behaviors than it is to be the cure. We need courage, vulnerability, hard work, empathy, integrity (and a little grace wouldn't hurt).

I believe we need common sense gun laws. I believe we need better access to mental health services. Neither one of these things will happen unless we're willing to listen and to speak up about our own experiences and share our ideas. We can't afford to be the silent majority on these issues.

I'm not a member, but I seriously doubt that the NRA always speaks for the NRA membership. I don't believe the media are in service to the public as much as they are in service to advertisers and ratings. When I see the media interview children or jump on the autism/Asperger's storyline it confirms that they know very little about mental health (otherwise they wouldn't be so careless with their reporting).

I know some people will read this and think that my beliefs are part of the problem. Others will agree with me. Some of you aren't sure what you think. I'm not lobbying for my ideas, I'm asking that we all take the time to figure out what we believe, why we believe it, and then share those beliefs with our legislators.

In times of national crisis we often think, "My stories don't matter – this isn't about me" or "I'll stay quiet because I'm somewhere in the middle of the obnoxious people raging on TV." The truth is that in the midst of tragedy nothing matters more than our stories. Our complex, nuanced stories are the path to healing and change. They are the truth and there's no better foundation for change than the truth.

We need politicians and policies that reflect the stories of our lives, not the stories that are easy to sell because they create fear and blame.