

What If It Happened Here?

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This is the story of Hasim, told from his point of view.

“I remember feeling I was on top of the world. I was fifteen, I had new friends who ranged anywhere from eighteen to twenty-two. It was my first time selling drugs. I used to do things to show I wasn't your average kid; I wanted people to respect who I was.

“This night four of my new friends go across the street, I'm standing there with another friend. Out of nowhere he yells, `Yo!' Look out!' I knew somebody had a gun. I started to run. My instincts said, see what you're running from; I turned around, I saw the silhouette of the gun, a Tech 9, a sub machine gun. I looked down, my pants made this funny move, something hard hit me in my back and I fell. The noise the gun fire made was deafening; it was so close to me, and this gun holds thirty-six bullets. I thought the guy was going to walk up and kill me. When I opened my eyes I was out on the street by myself calling, `Yo! Yo! I got shot!' My new friends were gone. I threw the drugs; I knew how the police were going to treat me if they saw drugs, they weren't

going to rush me to the hospital, they were just going to look at this as another case of some black kid getting shot, label it, and the treatment I was going to get in the hospital. I remember feeling really afraid because I couldn't understand why I couldn't walk or move. I'm saying, 'Please God, don't let me die.' The fear I had went away; it was as if the world blinked. I can still recall that feeling today.

“The ambulance finally gets there, they put oxygen on my face. I remember feeling so good because I had that fresh air, and just wanting to go to sleep. Something in me was being pulled from the bottom; voices were getting further away. All of a sudden I could hear my mother in the front of the ambulance, she kept yelling, 'I told you to take out the garbage, I told you to wash the dishes, I told you to take those movies back,' and just fussing at me. I'm saying, 'Mom, be quiet, I'm trying to go to sleep.' And once I said that the ambulance workers were saying, 'We got him! We got his BP!' "The kid that shot me, he was sixteen, I didn't know him, he was sent by somebody else who didn't want us selling drugs where he sold drugs. He gave this kid a sub machine gun, and he gave him money and said, 'I want you to take care of them.'

“This type of thing has been happening so often throughout the inner cities, for fifteen years now, and it's just now and within the last five years that more people are starting to see a problem in America, and it's not just with young African Americans, but now the problem is

spreading across the country. When young people understand the decisions they're making and how it's going to affect them, we'll be able to make more of an impact. What I'm doing now, talking to young people about what happened to me, I think that's going to benefit a lot of kids. It's not cool to kill somebody. It's not cool to be in jail. A lot of time young people get it distorted about what's cool and what's not.”

Gun violence happens everywhere. It happens in Hasim’s neighborhood, and it happens in our city. It may not happen in your neighborhood, but what if it did? How long would we be silent if the horrors that occurred to Hasim happened closer to home? His story reveals a number of things to us. As a parent, I identified with the mother in the story. Mothers are the same wherever you go I think. Her concern for her son is heartbreaking. Before one considers the issue of gun violence as a community problem, it is important to begin with the stories. For each victim has a story. Each family a missing member and life shattered.

2010 was the most violent year for gun crime in the city of Wilmington in its history. There were 146 shootings, and of those 27 were fatal. These numbers are unacceptable. That was the Governor’s opinion when he received that information earlier this year. He, along with Attorney General Biden, began working with the city of Wilmington’s mayor and police chief to develop a strategy. They created what has been called “Operation Pressure Point”, based on a

similar program in Philadelphia. Operation Pressure Point is a two pronged strategy for dealing with gun violence. The first stage is to increase the number of police in the city in those areas where the violence occurs the most. The other stage is to work with local community organizations to help people with education, drug rehabilitation, and other root causes of violence and poverty.

Operation Pressure Point began exactly six months ago, so it is too soon to tell how well it is working. But it was hailed by city officials as a well-reasoned response to their concerns about gun violence in Wilmington. What I like about the strategy is that it takes a holistic and systematic approach to the problem and doesn't just rely on police. Of course a quick response time by the police is vital, and ultimately that is only possible if you have more cops where violence is happening. However I believe it is that community component that is the most important aspect of the new strategy. One has to treat the underlying problem in addition to the outward symptom. Furthermore, the social aspects of Operation Pressure Point have the possibility of building up the community and making it a better place to live. It will be interesting to see what the 2011 numbers will be and how this program has ultimately worked.

It is very difficult to get into the issue of gun violence without also considering race. Often it isn't spoken out loud of course, but underlying the gun violence issue can be the unspoken attitude that it

happens to “those people over there,” and not to “me and my people.” Too often gun violence is ignored or written off as tragic yet acceptable so long as it stays in a particular neighborhood. The thing I most like about the Governor Markel’s Operation Pressure Point is that it explicitly breaks that underlying assumption. Just by creating a strategy at all he is saying, “This violence is happening to *all of us*. If it is happening anywhere in this state, it is of my concern and my responsibility. And here is my plan to deal with it, not only the symptom, but the cause as well.” It is refreshing to see a politician do the right thing and hopefully it will turn out to be the effective thing too.

The philosopher Cornel West calls racism the dehumanization of African American people. I am sure he would extend that to other minority groups as well. Racism by this definition is a spiritual condition. Racism is a division of humanity into different categories. Generally speaking these categories can be summed up as “Us” versus “Them” or “my kind” versus “their kind.” Eventually this division reaches such an extreme state that the other, the them, the their kind, don’t even count as human beings anymore in my conception of the world. This was certainly the case prior to the Civil War. If you read abolitionist materials of the 19th century most of it is an attempt to prove to people that, yes in fact African American people are people too. “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” being the most powerful example.

For those of you who have been Unitarian for any length of time, I am sure you can spot where our theology would depart from this. Unitarians and Universalists both forged their religious identities insisting on bringing together this dualistic “us versus them” mentality. The Unitarians brought together the members of the trinity into one Godhead. The Universalists, perhaps the kings and queens of rejecting dualism, could not believe that God would divide humanity into us versus them, the sheep and the goat, and so insisted that EVERYONE, *universally*, is loved and forgiven by an all-merciful God and therefore would be going to heaven.

And thank goodness that we have inherited such wisdom. Once you have dehumanized another group, then you have mentally let yourself off the hook for all kinds of atrocities to be acceptable. You see this in recent memory of events like humiliating prisoners at Abu Graib. Of course the most dramatic example was what the Nazis did to the Jews in World War Two. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the author of our modern reading today, was one of the most brilliant Protestant theologians of his generation. He was shocked at what the Nazis were saying, and then eventually doing to the Jews. Even more, he was shocked that no one else was shocked. His reasoning was that God loved humanity so much that he incarnated into the world as a Jewish rabbi. If God loved humanity enough to become one of us, shouldn't we too love each other, particularly the most vulnerable and at risk members of society? His

point was that the Jews count as human beings, even in the terrible historical situation he found himself in by living in a society that refused to acknowledge that common humanity. Despite being an ardent pacifist, Bonhoeffer decided to join in a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. He was imprisoned and eventually killed in the closing weeks of the war.

Bonhoeffer would not tolerate violence and oppression against another group, and expected more from his countrymen in speaking out against such atrocities. Bonhoeffer had spent some time in America, specifically Harlem studying the African American churches there, and this was very influential upon his understanding of minorities. During his time in Harlem, he begins to awaken to some of the realizations that Shantideva points to.

“Although it has many divisions, such as arms and so on, the body is protected as a whole. Likewise, different beings, with their joys and sorrows, are all equal, like my self, in their yearning for happiness. Even though my agony does not hurt anyone else’s body, that suffering of mine is unbearable because I cling to it as mine. Likewise, although others’ suffering does not descend upon me, that suffering of theirs is difficult to bear because they cling to it as ‘theirs.’ I should eliminate the suffering of others because it is suffering, just like my own suffering. I should take care of others, just as I am a sentient being.”

This is what we need to bear in mind when we hear stories like Hasim's or the stories of families who have had a loved one taken from them so abruptly. Their suffering and mine are equal. I have always found it very interesting that when Buddhists talk about interconnectedness and how we are all co-dependent arising with each other, most of the time they get their through the window of our shared suffering. It is not by some grand experience of enlightenment that you come to understand how you are interrelated with the rest of the universe. It is when you see that your heart breaks for the things that your neighbor's heart breaks for. The spiritual life could be understood as a continual process by which you allow your heart to break for more and more people ever wider and ever seemingly "different" than you are.

For it is then, and only then, that there would be no more "here" or "there" where the gun violence is taking place. It wouldn't be the kids of "those people over there" who have to worry about drugs and getting shot at any time. They would be our kids, and our sense of "our neighborhood" would have widened to the point where we come to see that yes in fact it does happen here among us, in Wilmington, in Delaware, in the United States.

So what then do we do? Well if I had the answer on how to solve gun violence in three easy steps I would definitely have gone out and done it by now. I think the first step is to make ourselves aware of gun

violence in our community and to be brave enough to listen to the stories of how gun violence has destroyed families and communities. When we take the risk to let those stories deeply penetrate our heart, and move us, then we will be in a place to take some sort of concrete action. It can't just be an intellectual discussion at a distance, but it has to really connect to you at a soul level.

When we do get there, I think step two is partnering with other groups and churches. This can help us learn, but more importantly it magnifies our effectiveness. Unitarian Universalists or Christians or Jews or Buddhists, none of us have cornered the market on doing good things in our community. There is always more help to be done. But it involves working with those organizations, maybe some of the same groups partnering on Operation Pressure Point, and getting our hands dirty.

And lastly I think it is good to struggle in the not knowing. This is a very uncomfortable place for us Unitarian Universalists who pride ourselves on reason and figuring everything out right away and having the sixteen point plan on how to fix the world. I know because I am that kind of Unitarian Universalist! But what I have come to see through painful trial and error is that not every problem has an answer that presents itself immediately. It can take time chewing on what could we do, what can we do, given our resources and our creativity, to heal a community damaged by death and violence. We should start by taking

our cue from Governor Markel and say, “This is not acceptable.” And we can do so much more.

May we never stop struggling with the hard questions and looking for the difficult answers. Let us be sensitive to the suffering of more and more people in the world. And may gun violence in our city never happen here or any where again. Amen Blessed Be.