

# And How Are the Children?

by Colleen Appel

February 25, 2018

Mr. President, legislators, school board members, UU congregation -- how are the children?

Opening words were from Rev. Patrick O'Neill, minister of the First Unitarian Congregational Society of Brooklyn, New York, including the following in italics:

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/and-how-are-the-children>

*I wonder if every adult among us, parent and non-parent alike, felt an equal weight for the daily care and protection of all the children in our community, in our town, in our state, in our country... I wonder if we could truly say without any hesitation, "The children are well, yes, all the children are well."* Rev. Patrick O'Neill

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Last Sunday in our UU youth class, one of the teens told us she learned of the Valentine's Day school shooting when she asked her mother why was the flag hanging at half-mast again, cementing the notion that there are too many shootings. How are the children if they are thinking a flag at half-staff signifies an act of violence rather than a tribute?

Another of our teens said that his English teacher spoke to him and his classmates the day after the shooting, reassuring them that administrators and teachers were taking steps to keep students safe. How are the children if they are thinking that their schools are not safe places, the notion reinforced by the keys we carry and the way we survey the hall before we walk down it?

I was scheduled to read something different today, but I felt compelled to speak as a teacher and as the chair of the Religious Education committee. For the sake of our children, I'm going to ask you to fully and fiercely embrace our first principle -- we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all, including our children.

Calling on the first principle is the best way for me to enter this insane conversation surrounding gun ownership. I have no response to the legislator who was asked by Moms Demand Action against Gun Violence to support comprehensive background checks. He considered the additional \$15 a background check would add to the cost of a rifle, declared his inalienable right to own a gun ought not to be taxed, and asked the MOMS group to consider the possibility of charging \$10 to vote!

Please don't arm teachers. I taught junior high. I'm certain that instead of planning the structure of an essay, some of my students would be speculating what my gun looked like, where I carried it, and how could they distract me. It's enough of a chore to guard a purse.

Would it come to pass that parents request the teacher who has her conceal and carry and reject the classrooms of teachers who are not gun adept? Will the teacher who does not carry a gun be accused of not loving her students enough? Will the willingness to carry affect hiring decisions?

In referring to the Florida shooting, Gabby Giffords asks us to consider "...what our innocent children felt as the gunshots rang out, bullets flew through the halls of their school, and their teachers and classmates were gunned down." I am certain the sounds and images will haunt them forever. I have never heard the gunshots that took a life, but I do have some credentials that qualify me to speak.

In 2012, the teachers at my school were told to keep our doors locked to guard against intruders, and the principal would pass through the halls jiggling the door knobs, testing our compliance. Our doors could not be locked from the inside, so every time someone had to leave or return, it fell to me to step outside the door with a key. I felt like a jailor.

I once hunkered down with 30 students in the dark in a windowless classroom while tornado winds destroyed the building down the hall. Fearful children frantically texted their parents.

My students wrote about loss, trauma, and abuse. There are far too many stories. I had in my classroom the child whose parents were imprisoned and wondered if anyone noticed him. The child testifying against the biological father. The child with a grandfather murdered for his lottery money.

The child who grows up to be, in our president's words, "deranged," "a savage sicko with bad intent" was once a child who might have written a similar story, who wanted to be loved, who potentially could have been rescued by a circle of care. Offer a mental wellness program. Ban assault weapons so I don't have to add "monitor potential shooters" to my teacher to-do list.

As a parent, I have received a last message from a child. My oldest child, while in Hawaii, texted me to say there was a ballistic missile headed her way and she wanted me to know she loved me.

Someone I loved walked into Walmart and bought a shotgun to end her life....

I recently presented a class to nursing students on the power of writing to heal and spoke to teachers at a conference about helping students write about loss, but I wasn't satisfied with either presentation. I can do an outstanding job of getting students to write their stories, but

what do I do once they have wept on the page? What do I do to protect the young so they're only writing about losing pets and not losing classmates?

I was so dissatisfied with the presentation I delivered last weekend that when I went to bed Saturday night, I asked the God of My Understanding, or my brain at rest -- both of them are equally intriguing -- to give me an answer. I did have an epiphany (my son would be doing some serious eye-rolling at this point). When I woke, my brain screamed "Love them fiercely!" I think that meant take my cue from Danielle who can make everyone feel like the brightest star in the universe.

Love the children more than I've ever loved them before. I have always thought my biggest failing as a teacher was I didn't have enough heart behind my great lesson plans; I didn't connect with my students as easily as the teacher next door whom I greatly admired for the easy conversations she had with her kids. I'm working on forgiving myself. I did not learn the art of conversation growing up, but I can practice it now.

Let's celebrate what we do here to draw children into a circle of care.

A thing of beauty is connecting women in the Sew Sew group to some girls we haven't even met. Have you seen or read about the menstrual kits we are creating? With every stitch on this beautiful fabric, I am thinking about the girl who might use a kit with an item I sewed. These kits, which consist of two shields, eight liners, two panties, two plastic bags serving as mini washing machines, a bar of soap, and a drawstring storage bag, will last for three years. We are doing a simple, but deeply meaningful, thing that helps girls go to school and women go to work. Without a solution to her monthly cycle, 1 in 10 girls in sub-Saharan Africa, 113 million girls in India, and 30% of the girls in rural Brazil will miss school this year. With instruction from the Days for Girls organization, we are providing a beautiful way to support young women and keep them in school.

Each kit costs about \$10 to make. We've been able to create ten kits. We welcome your help at our sewing sessions. We welcome your donations for shipping costs. Any extra money will go toward future projects we lovingly undertake.

We have an outstanding religious education program directed by Amber Fox. When I signed on for the religious education chair, I told her that I wasn't interested in teaching. I've done my time and surely teaching is better left to young people. But Naomi came back from Leadership School on fire so Karla, Kenna and I said yes to supporting her in creating a space for young people. Naomi, with the help of her brother Isaac, does a fantastic job of taking our curriculum and adapting it for role-playing games. We adults are having a great time hanging out with our delightful teens.

Amber is always in need of teachers and volunteers downstairs. You might commit to a once a month presence during one of the hours between nine and noon. If you're a greeter, you might

make it a point to ask the children how they are doing. Consider attending the RE committee meetings to help Amber think through the vital programs she offers to children. She is currently planning the summer program for our children and their families called Fish with Feet and she will be looking for volunteers. It will be held on Saturdays this year, making it possible for more children and volunteers to attend.

Springfield is a resettlement city, hosting about 300 refugees primarily from the Congo. Our church supports the resettlement program. Did you know research shows a single visit to a university can change a student's path after high school? Last December ten high school students from the Congo came to the MSU campus to attend a writing conference that I coordinate. You might consider sponsoring students for our middle school conference in May.

Let everything we do here for children be done with love. If we treasure, honor, and embrace Nancy, Willow, Cooper, Julian, V, Kaylee, Isaac, Piper, every UU child and every child we meet, we build the culture that counters violence and encircles children. Let us love all our children FIERCELY.

Let's start framing all the talk surrounding school shootings with the question "Does it protect the children?" Get involved and work for gun laws that make sense. Send thoughts and prayers, and then get up and do something to love a child.

How are the children? May "All the children are well" be our response. Blessed be. Amen.

*Molly Fisk*

### **VIOLENCE FRACTAL**

First it's locations you've never heard of, then far-away places you haven't been. Then countries you've traveled to, but not that city, and not in a long time. Slowly, a tulip unfurling red petals, it's Paris, Rio, Toronto. And Florida, where your grandmother lived and you flew for a visit, age 12. Frogs on the window screen croaking all night. Las Vegas is just one state over. So far no one you know, but now it's people your friends can name: a daughter's schoolmate's psychologist mother. This week a bike path, a Walmart in Denver where Ellen still lives and your favorite niece, but no one we know shops at Walmart, do they? Soon, though. It's only a question of numbers and luck. It will be someone you liked but lost touch with, a boyfriend, a roommate. Then someone you love. And then you.

—from [Poets Respond](#)

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