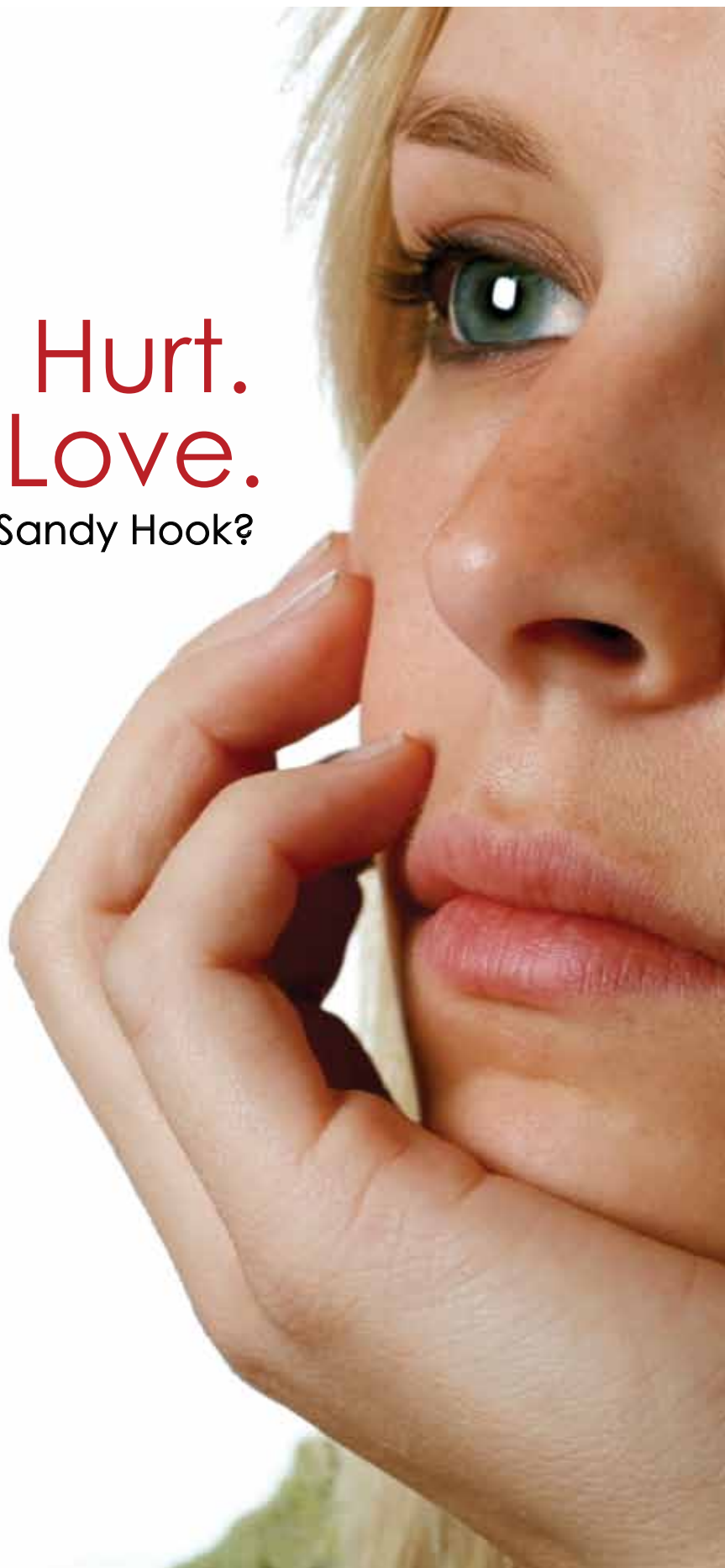


special report

Share The Hurt. Show The Love.

What are the lessons of Sandy Hook?

Story by Susan Heller





If you find yourself feeling anxious, unsure of what to do, unsafe and somehow vulnerable, you are not alone. Most of Connecticut has been in high anxiety mode for nigh on a year and a half now. Some would reckon that number far higher. Already disempowered by the Enfeebling Recession, we were slammed by Hurricane Irene, knocked to our knees a mere two months later by Halloween Nor'easter Snowstorm Alfred, then summarily flattened by Hurricane Sandy. That's a lot of upheaval and upset.

Then came Sandy Hook. Unspeakable, unfathomable, unreal. It is important to understand that precisely because it has been such an anxious time in the state, the feelings of upset that have been simmering just beneath the surface erupt more forcefully than ever into our psyches. Newtown could have been Anytown. But it wasn't. It was here in our precious state and most of us don't even know what to think. Let alone do.



There are many levels and nuances of emotions and behavior that apply to the experience of serious trauma. The following is an overview of the basics that some may find helpful. According to experts at The Department of Children & Families (DCF), the impact of trauma on a community (that includes the state level as well as the town and the county) attacks on three major levels.

The first affects how people view themselves. For those most directly involved, feelings of being victimized, of being unprotected and unsafe are huge. I've noticed people from surrounding towns also feeling very tentative, but there is a self-consciousness around not wanting to appear exploitive, people don't want to be seen as trying to co-opt the drama into their world. However, the reality is it is in their world, in our world, as the planet-wide coverage made very clear.

The next level of impact has to do with how people see or perceive others. We all know that bad things do happen but we cannot move through the world successfully if we are contracted in a permanent flinch position. An attack as precipitous and seismic as this one, shatters any illusion of safety and trust. Hyper vigilance such as going to a grocery store or walking down the street and looking around for those who might have the capacity to do something awful, is a completely normal reaction to something this random and horrific.

The third place of immense sensitivity has to do with how people close to the trauma feel they are being perceived by others. They don't

want to be defined by the event. Outsiders may use the buzz phrase – Tragedy at Newtown as shorthand to reference the situation – but that phrase is an analog for those who were there; it has the sights, the sounds, the bone-cracking sorrow enwrapped within it.

One suggestion family psychotherapist Alison Birnbaum, LCSW, makes is granting yourself the simple permission of not knowing. “Not knowing the answer, not knowing how best to proceed and just allowing that to be there in any discussion you have with others. I have

indeed seen this type of child and this type of family dilemma in my practice. There aren't a lot of good answers for it. So when there has been such damage to a community,” she con-

The people of Newtown will, in time, continue to find ways to succeed at redefining themselves and their town.

tinues, “everybody is affected and real healing has to be a step by step process. Everyone involved needs to have extraordinary patience for the first year – it takes that long just to come to terms with the facts of what happened.” That said, there are things you can do now. There are ways you can activate your feelings into positive, creative action. A perfect example of healing through right action is one that I wrote about in the current issue of East Coast Home & Design. It had to do with a bag of M&Ms taped to a lovely note left in a parking lot under a windshield wiper that said: 26 Acts of Kindness – In honor of the Sandy Hook Elementary Shooting victims. (www.echomeanddesign.com)

Alison invites people to find their own right action. “Do something you know creates a tiny wave of compassion and is thoughtful toward another person. Known or unknown doesn't matter – you will know it

just a thought

Sticks & Stones May Break My Bones...

.....You know the rest of this nursery rhyme because it's a very effective meme. A meme is an idea, sensibility or concept that enters a society's vernacular, sideways. It spreads through music, rhymes, speech, email, stories and images. I have an experiment I would like to try and it involves the afore mentioned aphorism because the intended teaching moment of the statement is obvious but it isn't accurate; by a long shot. Words, as we all know, can really hurt. They can also create, lend credence to, and substantiate all manner of ideas, notions and mind-sets.

The Background Question

What if, over the last decade, every single time the fear-provoking word terrorist was used in the national and international press, the word coward had been invoked instead? Take a few examples from the last six months or so in The New York Times:

United Arab Emirates Arrests Suspects in Terror-“Cowardice” Plots

U.S. Seems Set to Brand Militant Group as “Terrorist” “Cowards”

U.S. Places Militant Syrian Rebel Group on List of Terrorist “Cowardly” Organizations

Would young, disaffected, or disillusioned men swear allegiance to it? Would hardcore misfits yearn to be identified as cowards? Our words help define the world we create. Terrorism connotes threat, fear and menace. What extraordinary power to grant those wishing others harm.

Obviously there are those in radical coward groups who are motivated by religious zeal, but not unlike bullies, many are feeling profound powerlessness. Seeking validation. Self-importance. A reason for living (and dying). If every country and press agency in the world “honors” them with the title of terrorist what better fuel for their fire?

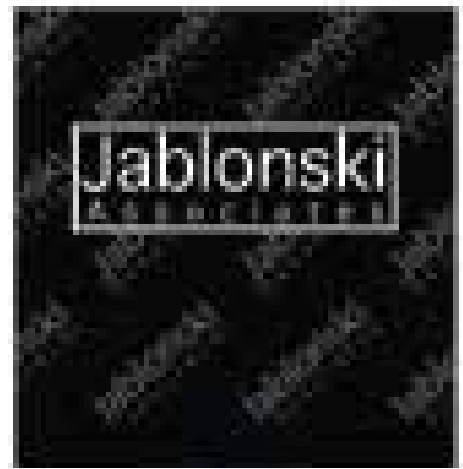
I am not naïvely suggesting it would cure anything or that we can, in retrospect re-brand a cultural trope. However, I am thinking that the reverence for reactionary violence that remains extant in our reptilian brains needs to be updated to the newest Operating System; that would be the one that has a Delete button called nuclear war. Perhaps one way to come at the issue is to think like a meme – and move in all ways, sideways. The Experiment

Would it make a difference in the way that you perceive your safety and that of your family if for the next several weeks or so; any time you see, read or hear the righteous, epinephrine-inducing battle-cry- for-blood term, terrorist, you replace it with the emasculating term, coward? Will your perception of vulnerability be shifted even slightly by something so basic and internal?

Quantum mechanics says that what we put our attention on winks into existence, becomes substantive. Memes are one way to share social ideas, constructs, even humor. It certainly couldn't hurt to try the experiment and while we're at it, are there other buzz words, terms, or ideas you would like to phase out of your lexicon and still others you would like to incorporate into your family's cultural zeitgeist?

The Results What terms or ideas would you like to see replaced or shifted in the world vocabulary? At work? Or at your kids' school. Let us know and we'll publish the most popular and innovative ones. Who knows, you may just be the author of a new world-wide meme that enters the Collective – sideways.

Email the Editor at: shelley_mccormick@yahoo.com



special report

is a gesture of kindness.” That outreach can be anything from donating to your local food bank to calling a social service agency or a church to see if there is anything you can get involved in. You may also want to use a creative act as your own sort of ritual, something that will make other people happy because even small rituals start to rebuild care and consideration.

Alison raises another difficult point. “It is so tough to know that there are people thinking, ‘Everybody has gone back to their normal, and I will never, ever have normal again.’ Nobody wants to talk about that.” She’s right, the very idea that so many families are going through this is gut wrenching.

The realization that for them, it isn’t really ever going to be over is something that leaves people feeling threatened; some have even expressed embarrassment because they’re feeling superstitious, if they don’t think about it, it won’t happen to them. Everybody has to be allowed their own path. However, if you feel you would like to help hold some connection to those in need for the long term, it is easy enough to do. Alison says, “Just make an agreement with yourself or perhaps with others that you’re going to find a way to hang in for maybe the next year on this issue. That you will find ways to give your energy a little at a time – in an enduring way, rather than short term.” You might frame this as a performance of meaning – whereby you take the power from your head and your heart and make it tangible, put it into action through your own expertise and competency.

It’s sort of like constructing a spiritual mirror where along with all the others who are working behind the scenes, you are taking people who need loving support by the arm and you are walking them gently into the future. I’m going to do something a little unorthodox (as if you haven’t already figured out that is my M.O. in life) and repeat almost verbatim, something I wrote for another magazine; East Coast Home & Design. Because, if anything bears repeating, this does.

If you are moved to do something (financial) you can go to www.sippin.com

and make a donation for the Sandy Hook School Support Fund. You can visit the Department of Children & Families website www.ct.gov and volunteer as a mentor. You can go to this link www.newtown.uwwesternct.org and the United Way will see that your donation goes to the right place. You can visit Newtown and support the town’s economy by stopping to buy something in a store.



12.14.12

It's sort of like constructing a spiritual mirror where along with all the others who are working behind the scenes, you are taking people who need loving support by the arm and you are walking them gently into the future.

One individual in Westport simply put up a sign that said “Pray for Newtown”. The people of Newtown will, in time, continue to find ways to succeed at redefining themselves and their town. There is a precedent for this, one you should know about. Columbine. Again, the single term that holds so much... and yet. The legacy has evolved into something far different; something called Rachel’s Challenge. If you don’t already know about it, you won’t believe it. Any words I use to describe it will sound like over-the-top hyperbole, but I assure you that is not the case. I don’t make promises lightly, but I will promise you this: it will change you. I don’t usually put content-dependent links in print magazines, but in this case, I really must. If you are near a computer, if you have your smart phone, go to this link: www.rachelschallenge.org.

If not, take this magazine back home or to work with you and check it out from there. Rachel’s Challenge has been in Connecticut in almost a dozen towns and the power of the movement just keeps growing. It is too soon for Newtown to follow suit, though I have no doubt they will one day. And until that day we will keep them in our hearts and in our prayers.

Susan Heller has earned a reputation for excellence as a Writer, Ghostwriter, Producer and Director. She also designs and directs TV spots, advertising, video and multimedia presentations when she’s not writing speeches or helping other professionals hone their public speaking skills.

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST HOME DESIGN SHOW

MARCH 21-24, 2013

THURSDAY: OPEN TO THE TRADE & PREVIEW TICKET HOLDERS **FRIDAY-SUNDAY:** OPEN TO THE PUBLIC
PIER 94, 55TH STREET AT TWELFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK CITY



For tickets and show details, visit ADHomeDesignShow.com

CO-SPONSORED BY

The New York Times
NYTIMES.COM

SHOP. BE INSPIRED. CELEBRATE DESIGN.

Vignettes by 400+ Exhibitors | Design Seminars
Cooking Demos | Book Signings | Special Events and More



CO-LOCATED WITH

DIFFA'S DINING BY DESIGN
NY 2013, a spectacle of dining
environments. diffa.org

SPONSORED IN PART BY



THE LINCOLN MOTOR COMPANY



Become a Fan



Follow Us @ADHomeDesign



PRODUCED BY
MERCHANDISE MART PROPERTIES, INC. MMPI

PHOTO BY NIKOLAS KOENIG; INTERIOR DESIGN BY INGRAO INC; ARCHITECTURE BY PRESTON T. PHILLIPS ARCHITECT