



WRITING THROUGH TRAUMA

Reaching for Others: Writing New Year's Wishes to Newtown Students

AUTUMN HAYES

"But—how do I know what they want?" Armarde asked, his face a dervish of anxiety. "I really want them to *like* it."

I couldn't blame him. I was at Lockhart-Turner Elementary School in Houston, Texas, working with Armarde and his fellow fourth-graders on an understandably daunting task: each child was to write and illustrate a New Year's wish for the students of Sandy Hook School in Newtown, Connecticut. The tragic shooting there was only six days behind them—fewer for students I'd already visited at Kelso Elementary—and I had made it clear that these wishes would be mailed out to real people in real pain.

The idea started this September, with an exhibit entitled "Dear John and Dominique: Letters and Drawings from the Menil Archives." I work at the Menil with Writers in the Schools in Houston, Texas, and I was particularly struck by a series of hand-painted New Year's cards from artist Niki de Saint Phalle. The gorgeous, full-page artworks, splashed with whimsical watercolors, wished pleasures like "friendly monsters in your dreams," and I knew—in a world of snark and online bullying—I wanted students to see and emulate such kindness, tenderness, and creativity.

Then Sandy Hook happened, and I faced the choice to: (a) pretend that this didn't affect us and teach revision as planned, or (b) walk the walk and engage 160 children in the messiness of reaching for others.

Fortunately, each class had discussed the events be-

forehand. Some students immediately struck the meat of the matter: "I wish that Connecticut was here because we are family," Aniyah wrote. But others, like Armarde, hesitated. What could he, or any of us, offer children so far away, confronting so much fear, confusion, and trauma? What would the children of Newtown really want from us?

Well, nothing. No amount of pretty words or kind sentiments can erase the terrifying memories or can bring back lost loved ones, friends, and teachers. But kind words and hopeful sentiments can, I believe, part the dark curtains of loneliness. They bring small reminders to the survivors—that happiness and life still await them when they are ready, beckoning in tiny, concrete experiences.

And so we talked about this, acknowledged it, for those afraid. We talked about how students in Connecticut are people—people who likely love SpongeBob and grandparents and sticky, sweet things, too—and about how we don't have to have all the answers, or any. We don't have to fix things. We can't. All we have to do is notice each other and show it, to look at each other steadily through all the chaos and say—however possible—"I see you. I care."

For some, that means sending flowers, gifts, or donations. For others, that means listening. For our band of fourth-graders, that meant sending forward bits of ourselves, our delights, our comforts and hilarities. It meant sending forward wishes for "homemade apple juice to drink when it's a hot, hot day," for "a nice little bit of music," for "a warm sun deep down inside you." It meant play and poems and prayers. It meant simple compassion—the best, if not the only, thing any of us can really offer in the face of tragedy.

Autumn Hayes is a freelance writer, creative writing teacher, and poet. Her poetry and short fiction have appeared or are forthcoming in Midtown, Defenestration, Southern Women's Review, Jersey Devil Press, and the micro-fiction anthology 140 and Counting. Find her on Twitter @autumnatic_daze.

