

An Unbearable Tragedy: The Newtown shootings prompted an outpouring of love and donations.

Written by Stephanie Finnegan
Wednesday, 02 January 2013 10:52 -

The new year has begun, and teddy bears are once again on my mind. In some ways, they are there as a source of comfort and strength. In other incarnations, they are occupying my thoughts as beacons of creativity and humor. No matter how I perceive them, teddy bears are a central focus of this blog, and of my corner of the world. Throughout the upcoming year, I'll share with you what I'm ruminating on and what I'm experiencing.

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{besps_c}0|1.jpg|Americans were heartbroken by the news reports of the Sandy Hook shootings. An outpouring of teddy bears descended upon the town. (This bear, courtesy of theflagshirt.com)|{/besps_c}

{besps_c}0|2.jpg|Gifts of bears, dolls, and toys have streamed into Newtown, Connecticut, as presents to entertain the children who have survived in the wake of their schoolmates' deaths. As of now, no plans have been made to distribute these hundreds of thousands of donations.|{/besps_c}

{besps_c}0|3.jpg|Spontaneous memorials filled with bears and other toys sprang up around the Newtown streets.|{/besps_c}

{besps_c}0|4.jpg|Some of the bears bore the names of the deceased children.|{/besps_c}

{besps_c}0|5.jpg|Messages of heartbroken despair and heartfelt hope were placed upon toys.|{/besps_c}

{besps_c}0|6.jpg|At Christmastime, an assemblage of favorite children's toys lined the streets of Newtown.|{/besps_c}

{besps_c}0|7.jpg|Teddy bears are lined up in an orderly row to pay tribute to the innocent victims of the shooting spree.|{/besps_c}

{besps_c}0|8.jpg|Snow has covered some of the bears that comprised the Sandy Hook Elementary monuments.|{/besps_c}

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It is hard to explain the sadness and despair that I felt when I witnessed the developing story of the Newtown shooting and its tragic aftermath. Following the unspeakable carnage that included so many innocent, precious children, most of us had a hard time accepting this vile action, and trying to understand how and why it could have happened. I shall always remember where I was when I saw the initial reports breaking on my local ABC news affiliate (having a late breakfast/early lunch with a former editor of mine). As the notion of a kindergarten and first-grade ambush began to materialize, I wanted to run home and find my own two children. I wanted to hug them tight, and tell them yet again how important they are to me.

For my children—aged 8 and 10—stuffed animals, including their beloved bears, will soon be parts of their past. My daughter, the younger of the pair, still sleeps with a battalion of bears, dogs, unicorns, and monkeys flanking her. Within her arms, though, are her most adored plush pets: her lamb (“Lambie”) and her pink-striped cat (“Cat”). She got these when she was a baby,

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and their names were chosen in her toddlerhood. She has confided in me that she can't imagine never having those two particular favorites in her life. And when she does have an occasional nightmare, it's always somehow circling around a scary or terrible event harming Lambie or Cat. She frets about them; she worries about them; she loves them.

Cuddling with cute toys and dolls and bears is what a child should do with his or her days. A child should not be cowering from an armed gunman or fleeing in terror from a school. After this unnatural event happened, we Americans have processed the crime and have strived to help. One of the first actions was the sending of dolls and bears to Newtown. These playthings were shipped to Connecticut from around the world, and the reasons behind the outpourings were as varied as the cuddly animals that arrived in town. Some people sent the bears to be used as a shrine or a memorial to the loss of life; others sent them to be handed out to the survivors and other residents of the beleaguered town. No matter the reason, the shipping of the soft, cuddly toys have grown so enormous that the town's spokespeople have requested a "cease and desist." The bears and such are just languishing now in warehouses and storage facilities.

When we all undergo a horrible event, the chance to connect to another person is sought after, and an embrace or a clasp on the shoulder of the hand does so much to relieve stress and refresh us and reassure us. It calms and bolsters us.

As bear aficionados and artists, we know the power of a hug. It's definitely not happenstance or irony that our collections are known as "hugs." It's a definite connection between the objects and what they make us feel. It's impossible to look at a gathering of adorable bears and not want to hug them. That's why the people of this nation sent the teddy bears to Newtown as a way to reach out and congregate the hurting souls in a loving and meaningful embrace. Folks couldn't go door-to-door hugging strangers. Instead, they sent the bears as their ambassadors.

I hope that the heartfelt exporting of the bears and dolls doesn't end up as an empty gesture. I have high hopes that the Newtown city elders will donate the tokens to children's hospitals, foster care families, homeless shelters, food banks, and other charitable venues.

It would be awful if these emblems of a country's concerns were left to languish and molder and eventually be discarded and thrown away. I've heard some guests at various holiday parties this past season bemoan the waste of money of sending these toys to a burg, like Newtown, that was wealthy and very "well off." They snickered about how it was "typical" of America: wasting money and trying to intrude on a story that didn't concern the senders at all. It was such a cynical view of people who wanted to help and to mourn and to show how the death of these children has affected us all.

I think that the teddy bears of Newtown—slugged as "items 484" by the warehouse sorting

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committees—are reflective of us as a nation, but not that we're a conglomeration of overspending, headline-chasing, fifteen-minutes-of-fame Kim Kardashian wannabees. Nope, it's just the opposite: these bears prove that no matter the economic climate of our country—whether our bureaucrats are careening us toward a fiscal cliff or weaving a temporary safety net out of gossamer strings—the average American is caring, concerned, selfless, and will dig into his or her own pocket to lessen the burden of a neighbor or a grieved stranger. These bears aren't some silly pursuit of a way to become a part of this awful, awful tragedy. Rather, they were a way to make the loss of the children more bearable to the parents and fellow town residents: their deaths were not forgotten and were not meaningless. They moved a whole population. And if we all could, we would have hugged those children close to us and have prevented their deaths. That wasn't possible to do, but the outpouring of toys was within our grasps.

The teddy bears of Newtown are America's hugs to the students who have survived, the grieving families of the deceased, and tributes to the short lives of the children who are now gone. Whether they are angels, spirits, familial anecdotes, or simply memories, they won't be forgotten. Our hugs—in every sense of the word—are with them now and forever.