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Mass Shootings and Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

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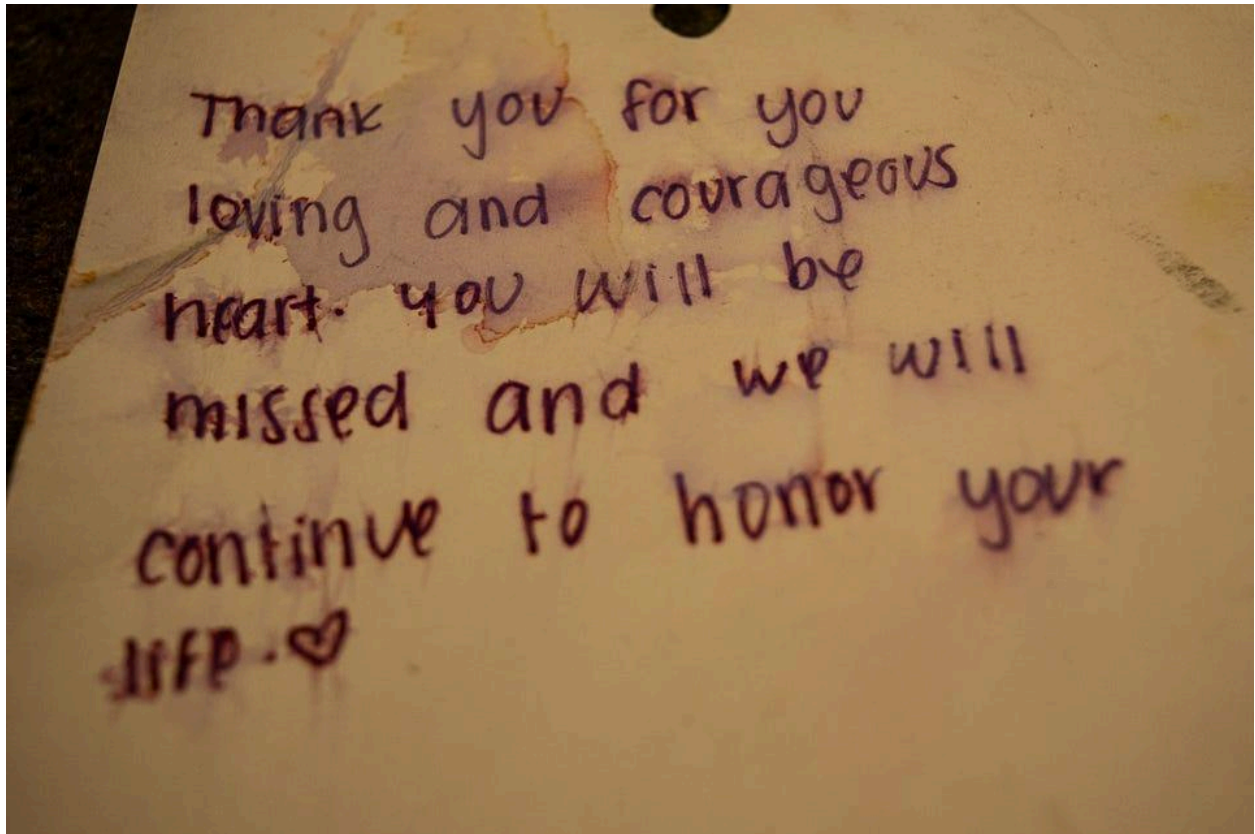
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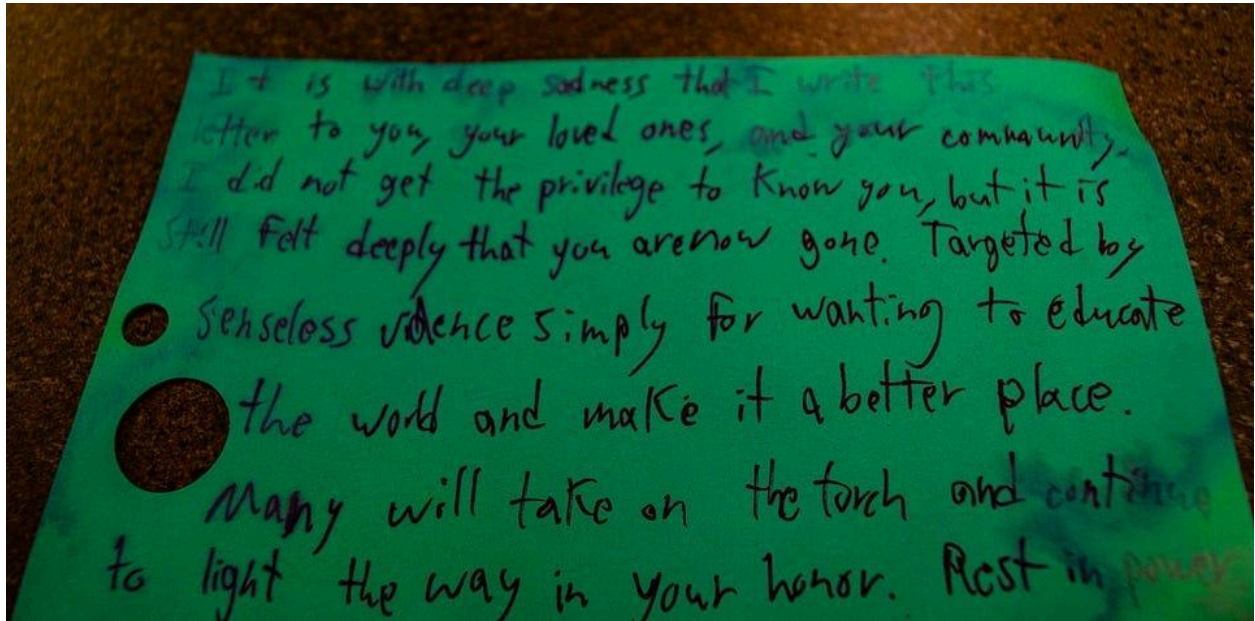
“My optimism wears heavy boots and is loud.”- Henry Rollins



Handwritten condolence card; photography by Kelly Stith

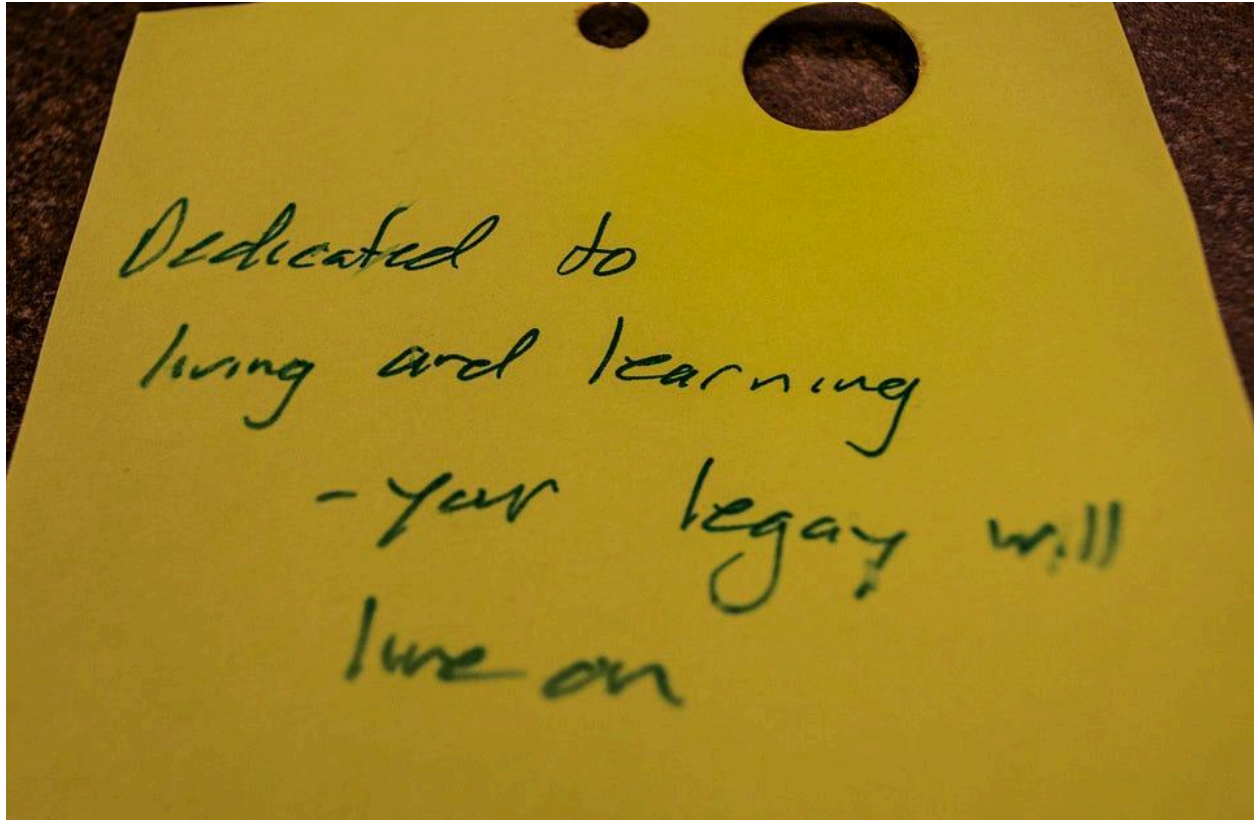
I am sitting in the University of Nevada Las Vegas Special Collections archive room in the Lied Library. I came here before to donate a zine of a previously published essay, [“Still Echoes.”](#) and photographs to a project they are coordinating in remembrance of the December 6, 2023, mass shooting. The Special Collections team was gracious enough to allow me to investigate other artifacts, including several handwritten condolence cards left at campus

memorials. Being here is harrowing and reminds me that these are not just mere notes but reflections of people's grief and the reckoning with a tragedy that rocked the whole community.



Handwritten condolence card; photography by Kelly Stith

Lives were forever altered that day. Even in the campus' quest to return to normality, the events of December 6th still haunt like a specter. When a mass shooting occurs, the same pattern emerges of thoughts and prayers being extended, with people then quickly moving on (thanks in no part to the 24/7 media coverage). I REFUSE to let myself fall into that trap. We OWE it to Drs. Takemaru, Navarro-Velez, Chang, and the countless other victims of gun violence to remember and carry on their legacies.



Handwritten condolence card; photography by Kelly Stith

As of this writing, according to [CBS News](#), there have been 200 school shootings in the US in 2024, with the incidents at Apalachee High School in Georgia and Joppatowne High School in Maryland happening within 2 days of each other. [Everytown for Gun Safety](#) reports that firearms are now the leading cause of death of children and teens in the United States. Nevada is also no stranger to acts of senseless violence. On October 1, 2017, a mass shooting at the Route 91 Harvest Music Festival on the Las Vegas Strip across from the Mandalay Bay Hotel and Casino killed 60 people. Over 400 others were injured, earning the distinction of being the [deadliest mass shooting in modern U.S. history](#).



Memorial for the fallen professors; photography by Steve Marcus

Having to grapple with the UNLV shooting has been difficult. Three professors passed away; a [fourth](#) was shot 10 times, and after 3 months spent in the hospital, underwent rehabilitation and is JUST now returning to campus. Imagining the sheer and utter horror of that day is heartbreaking. It still weighs on me, but it offers a newfound sense of purpose in my work as an educator. I am grateful to be alive and in a privileged position where I share knowledge with others. Trauma-informed pedagogy is a valuable tool for understanding how mass shootings impact educational institutions. By examining the theories of bell hooks and Paulo Freire, we can help those struggling and aim toward a greater awareness of how we can be leaders for change.

The University of Denver defines trauma-informed pedagogy as “a set of teaching approaches that consider the broader impacts of trauma and the potential paths to resiliency.” Trauma affects every student differently, and educators are key in shedding light on how they can develop strength in the face of adversity. They also consider a healing-centered methodology beneficial as it allows trauma to be viewed as not just “an individual isolated experience, but, instead...how trauma and healing are experienced collectively,” leading to a humanistic-centered approach that promotes the well-being of EVERYONE.

Eleni Damiandou and Helen Phtiaka state, “Critical thinking, self-reflection, and devotion to teaching are essential for being the ‘transformative intellectual’ teacher that acts within an emancipatory and empowering teaching framework that fosters democratic citizenship and equity”(237). Having passion and enthusiasm inspires students to become independent thinkers who have the power to shape the world around them can lead to a rewarding learning experience for teachers and students alike. Educators have an innate responsibility to model the classroom as a comfortable environment for everyone in the aftermath of crises.

Good morning Ms Stith,

I do not usually say this but I am a Marine Corps combat veteran. As a nine-year Marine Corps veteran, I always felt very prepared. At the time of the UNLV incident i was across the street working. I heard sounds I was very used to hearing, only this time I was completely helpless and unprepared. I can only think back to past experiences and how I was supposed to be the one to help people and be the difference maker and feel that I failed this time. I thought i had seen and done it all having seen combat across the world but being only across the street has been a very different experience. As I process that these were fellow Americans doing what we do every week it only makes it worse. I have not done anything since the incident but i know we must move forward. I will attend the virtual class everyday but i will have to leave early to make to my next class on time. I ask for a couple of more days to turn in writing project 3. I understand if turning this in late is unacceptable.

Email I received from a student after the December 6th shooting

College is a natural exploratory stage in a person’s life where challenges are to be expected. When one enters higher education with a history of trauma, however, considering the

emotional needs of students is crucial. Phyllis Thompson and Janice Carrello cite studies showing that “66% to 85% of youth report lifetime traumatic event exposure (and many report multiple exposures) by the time they reach college and that as many as 50% of students are exposed to a potentially traumatic event in their first year of college”(3). The level of trauma that so many young college students face firsthand demands urgency. Thompson and Carrello also suggest that one of the first steps that we can take is to be “aware of the prevalence and impact of trauma, crisis, adversity”(4),” and in “[Teaching in Times of Crisis](#),” a 2007 study by Therese A. Houston and Michelle DiPietro is referenced, saying “from the student’s perspective, it is best to do something. Students often complained when faculty did not mention the attacks at all, and they expressed gratitude when faculty acknowledged that something awful had occurred”(219). When senseless attacks like the one on December 6th happen, it can be challenging to approach dialogue about them. Acknowledging and validating students goes a long way.

The carnage of mass shootings leaves untold consequences in their wake. In “Trauma at School: The Impacts of Shootings on Students’ Human Capital and Economic Outcomes,” Marika Cabral et al. conducted studies that found that “Shootings at schools may be particularly detrimental for student mental health due to the locations in which they occur and the attention that they receive”(8). Universities are intellectual safe-havens. Mass shootings act as a violation against what students, faculty, and staff hold dear, leaving lasting emotional scars, and begging the question: can campuses be places of safety anymore?



New keypads installed in the BEH building elevators; photography by Becca Schwarz

Virginia Tech shooting survivor Kristina Anderson funded and started the [Koshka Foundation](#), a nonprofit organization highlighting ways colleges can improve campus security. In an NPR [interview](#), Anderson says while physical safety measures are important, “I think that true sense of safety is, how invested are we as an individual? Has this school really put forth a plan? Are there activities around safety and security? Does every person feel connected to that institution?” UNLV has already started to implement [improvements](#) on campus including restricted access to multiple floors of Beam Hall, along with new surveillance cameras and increased security and police presence. Yet, the fear lingers for many, like accounting professor John Zimmerman, who applauds these new efforts but [reveals](#) that with the death of his colleague Dr. Navarro-Velez, “You never forget. Every day I think about her, every single day.”

The BEH building reopened this semester, and while on campus for a weekly writing group with my colleagues, I explored and took photos. With it being my first return since the shooting, it was cathartic: walking around the space, I could FEEL its history in my bones. Seeing students and staff milling about, there was a revived sense of energy and life, but also an

overwhelming eeriness. The events of December 6th have left their imprint, and it is surreal to fathom. The week of the shooting, I was in one of the classrooms for a meeting. Those thoughts came flooding back upon my visit: “What if I was in the wrong place at the wrong time? What if they decided to come to campus while I was here?” I would not be alive. That is not lost on me.



Banner inside the BEH building hung after its reopening; photography by Kelly Stith

Compassion holds tremendous value. Jillian Petersen and James Densley say building bonds with others in the aftermath of mass shootings, “enable someone to notice a crisis and can empower people to say something”(81), as well as the fact that “human connection and acts of thoughtfulness are enough to get through the crises”(70). This is what drives me in my work as a

professor. We can strive toward that and cultivate a thought-provoking, positive environment, which Peterson and Densley state fosters “time and space for teachers to connect with students one-on-one,”(82) while emphasizing that “establish[ing] meaningful relationships are critical to this endeavor”(82). When social disengagement has become a norm, educators can help bridge that gap and extend empathy to their students.

Engaged pedagogy, as bell hooks defines it, is a holistic, embodied practice built on collaboration and emboldening students to view themselves as active thinkers, forming links between knowledge and the material conditions that shape their daily lives. hooks notes we must “practice being vulnerable in the classroom, being wholly present in the mind, body, and spirit”(21). As daunting and anxiety-inducing as it is, when I’m open with my students, it shows them that it is that it is NOTHING to be ashamed of.

“What can I even do to solve anything?” “The world is so far gone; what is even the point?” These are all questions I dealt with in the aftermath of the events of December 6th, but I slowly began to realize I could use my teaching career to help others. hooks expands on this in *Teaching to Transgress*, saying during crises, “learning could be liberatory [for students]”(6), and to do that “respect[ing] and [caring] for the souls of students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin”(13). Having sensitivity toward our students’ feelings and emotions and reminding them that they DO matter is a powerful conduit for learning. Despite the hierarchy and distance that is a barrier between professor and student, hooks says “what we ideally share is the desire to learn—to actively receive knowledge that enhances our intellectual development and our capacity to live more fully

in the world.” Being a mentor to students can enlighten them about the reciprocity of and the equal exchange of knowledge.

It is incredibly easy to feel helpless when you witness the normalization of mass shootings. hooks eloquently remarks in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, “Our senses are assaulted by the stench of domination every day, here in the places where we live. No wonder, then, that so many people feel terribly confused, uncertain, and without hope...[but] despair is the greatest threat. When despair prevails, we cannot create life-sustaining communities of resistance”(12). My students contend with apathy and disillusionment on a daily basis. They ARE valid feelings, but we CAN do something about these problems with revolutionary thinking. hooks urges that “Without ongoing movements for social justice in our nation, progressive education becomes all the more important since it may be the only location where individuals can experience support for acquiring a critical consciousness, for any commitment to end domination”(45). Teaching IS an act of benevolence, and with encouragement, students grow more empowered and driven.

The culture of fear that mass shootings perpetuate has ramifications both inside and outside the classroom, which hooks declares “undermines the capacity of students to learn. Fear-based students doubt that they can accomplish what they need to accomplish. More often than not they are overwhelmed by fear of failure”(132). NO ONE should feel that, especially students just trying to expand their horizons. Educators can be supportive presences and advocates for students to be better equipped to face perilous times with persistence.

The UNLV shooting was a shock to the system and provided me with a wake-up call. I must give back to others and seize new opportunities. Paulo Freire had a similar goal that he outlines in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and that was to take that notion and develop a pedagogical practice that “awaken[s] in the oppressed the knowledge, creativity, and constant critical reflective capacities necessary to unveil, demystify, and understand the power relations responsible for their oppressed marginalization and...begin a project of liberation through praxis which, invariably, requires consistent, never-ending critical reflection and action”(2). Educators’ duty should be to teach students to recognize their position in society and inspire them to use their voices to speak truth to power.

To transform the world, Freire claims, “the correct method lies in dialogue”(3), and developing a “critical pedagogy [that] helps the learner become aware of the forces that have hitherto ruled their lives and especially shaped their consciousness”(3), which can set conditions for producing a new vision of life and arrangements where “where power has been transferred to those who literally make the social world by transforming nature and themselves.”(3). Our students are the ones who are carrying us forward. We can help them build cognizance of how they can actively respond to systems of oppression so they can establish a brighter future.

Freire's pedagogical model necessitates that you be one with your students, commenting, “Conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth. Those who undergo it must take on a new form of existence; they can no longer remain as they are”(61). In tragedy, we HAVE to be willing to take what happened and create a conducive learning environment for our students. Freire admits that “change is difficult but possible”(14), and by coming together, we generate a mutual commitment toward improving the world.

When our psyches are broken by the devastation of mass shootings, disassociation and detachment are tough obstacles to overcome. Freire argues, however, that “Dialogue cannot exist...in the absence of profound love for the world and for people” (89), with it also requiring “an intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create”(90).” Hope, while seemingly fruitless to some, is something we MUST hold onto as a means to forge a positive vision for tomorrow. We CANNOT sit back and do nothing, and having an ethics of care enables us to turn discourse into action.

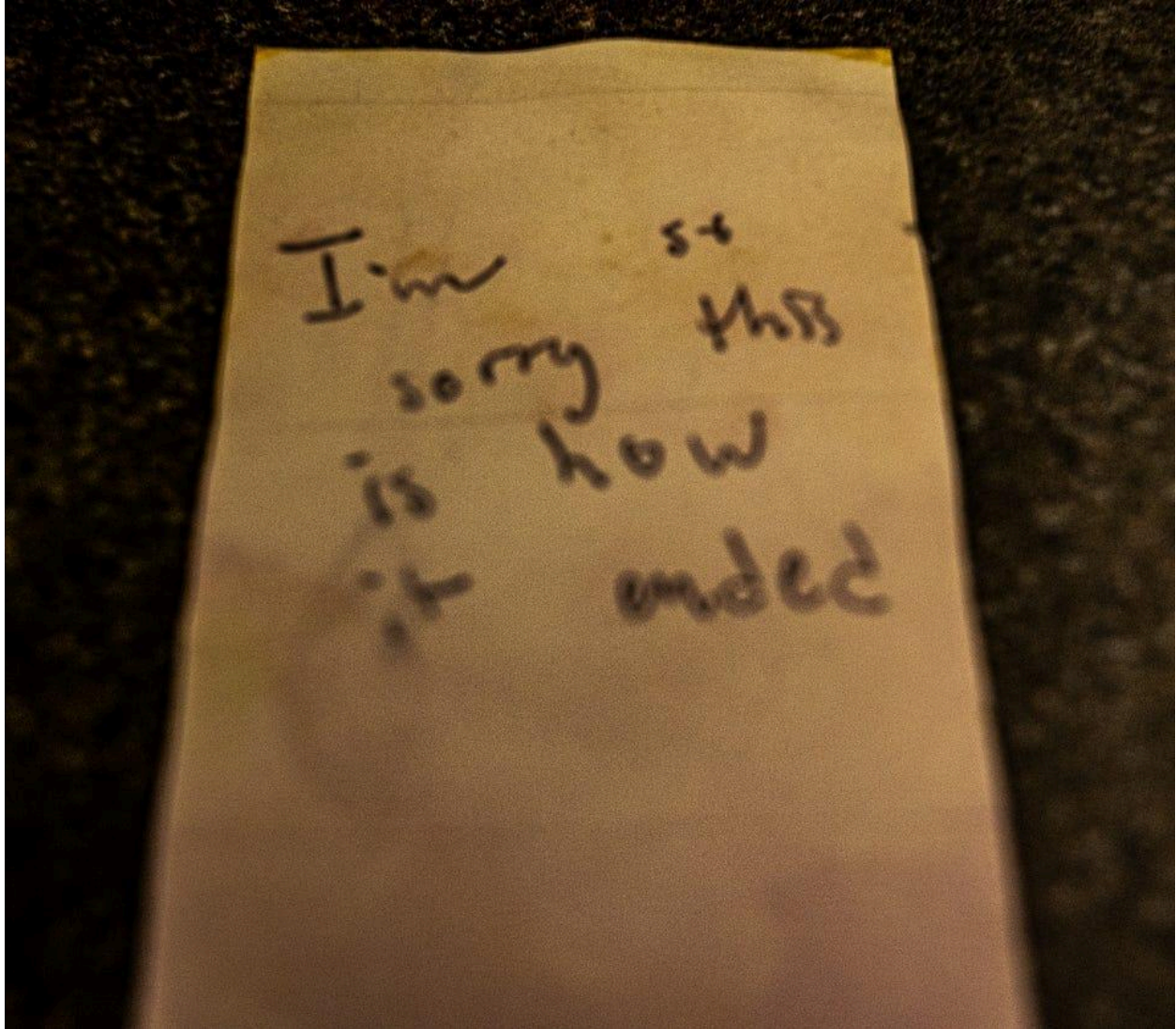


December 13th campus vigil; photography by Josh Hawkins

On December 13, 2023, a memorial vigil was held at the Lee Pascal Rose Garden on the UNLV campus. I was emotionally unmoored and still processing everything. The hundreds of people gathering to remember those lost emphasized the power of kinship and community. At the event, they handed out candles and bracelets bearing the “UNLV Strong” slogan. My inner cynic would look at those words and think “Why are we reducing this to a silly motto?” Bearing witness to everything, however, I now see things in a new light. To me, “UNLV Strong” represents hope and resilience, and that is something I am going to try my best to carry with me moving forward.

Using a trauma-informed lens, I better comprehend how the violent nature of mass shootings affects higher education and the work that I do. In an introductory composition course I teach, one student recounted an instance in EIGHTH GRADE when a peer brought an ammo magazine and bulletproof vest to school and threatened to “put them at the top of their target list,” and because of the “media presence, it has become normalized, and I feel desensitized to it at all.” Another said their “sense of self and ties to the communities I care about is ruined” and “when I hear about mass shootings, it sticks with me, and I always think about an escape plan in case it happens to me.” The fact that the young generation has to pay the price for our failure to address and rectify the destructive effects of the American mass shooting epidemic is sickening. They should not have to suffer for our mistakes.

Our shared goal NEEDS to be making the classroom a location of personal and intellectual growth, NOT terror. We MUST fight against the constant perpetuating cycle of violence. Through confronting conflict head-on with relentless courage and optimism, we CAN overcome.



Handwritten condolence note; photography by Kelly Stith

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