

# Mourning and mobilizing

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This month, Americans will show that love is stronger than hate. Millions will take part in celebrations of LGBT pride, and Muslims will fast as they observe the holy month of Ramadan. Just last week, we remembered those gunned down at a Charleston Bible study a year ago—killed by one man, but loved and missed by countless others. And in the coming days, mourners will attend funerals, memorial services and vigils for loved ones murdered at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, most of whom were gay and Latino.

Undoubtedly, in the weeks to come, the ugly rhetoric about bathroom bills, building walls, and barring people of an entire faith from entering this country will continue. Muslim women who wear the hijab may wonder if that is tantamount to a target. Patrons of gay establishments may worry, as churchgoers did after Charleston, that sanctuaries where they had felt joy, community and the comfort of being themselves are now unsafe. And no doubt, there will be more gun deaths—an average of 90 people die from gun shots each day in the United States, vastly more than in any other developed country. This is madness.

Republicans acceded to Sen. Chris Murphy's remarkable filibuster last week calling for votes on gun legislation, but then they vowed to defeat the measures. The best hope of addressing America's gun problem lies with the majority of Americans, including gun owners, who support stricter gun regulations. We must call out the hypocrisy when elected officials offer condolences after gun violence in one breath and defend civilians' right to own weapons of war in the next. With each successive mass shooting, I have grown convinced that a massive civic crusade on the order of the civil rights movement is necessary to force the hands of the gun lobby and their allies in elected offices. This must end.

The aim of the Orlando attack was to murder people like me, an LGBT American. So this is personal. But gun massacres have also taken place in schools, theaters, malls, churches, synagogues and office buildings. This must be personal for *all* of us. We may never fully eradicate the hatred and instability that drove the shooters in Newtown, Aurora, Charleston, San Bernadino and Orlando. But we can and must do two things: take a stand against the hateful rhetoric that is seeping into American life, and address the easy availability of weapons that transforms haters into mass murderers.

Such rhetoric is spilling over from the relative confines of conservative talk radio into the daily discourse of a man seeking the country's highest elected office. Donald Trump's run for the presidency is about stoking hatred and division, without even the pretense of decency. He has mocked and mimicked a reporter's physical disability and exhibited reprehensible misogyny. He has renewed his call to bar Muslims from entering the United States and suggested that President Obama is sympathetic to ISIS. He has promoted the use of violence against peaceful protesters with calls to "beat the crap out of them."

Unfortunately, this ugliness is being mimicked in American life, with chants of "build the wall!" directed toward students from a predominantly Latino school, and with students tormenting classmates from immigrant families by saying they'll be sent "home" if Trump becomes president. One columnist calls it the "Trump effect."

This is alarming, but our public schools also offer hope. They help break down stereotypes and help promote understanding and respect, and celebrate, not demonize, diversity. They're where students know their classmates as their lab partner, the photographer for the yearbook, a Yankees fan and the kid who loves to drop rap verses—rather than simply by their race, religion, ethnicity, sexuality or gender

identity. Our public schools are where children learn that differences aren't bad. Far from it; they are part of the fabric of America, and of life. Our diversity and our work to make America more inclusive, with opportunity and justice for all, are part of what "makes America great."

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Americans must stand up against efforts to marginalize certain people and groups. We must reject mass murders as the new normal. We must denounce those who whip up fear and try to turn Americans against each other. We must be our best selves, expanding an ever-widening circle of inclusion, showing greater openness to communities once excluded. There is a role for all of us in this—working to change not only laws, but attitudes; finding new allies to fight for sensible gun legislation and against hate.

Love is stronger than hate. We must show that in the way we act, speak and vote.



Jonathan Fickies

Weingarten at the United Federation of Teachers' Celebrate PRIDE 2016 event.

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