

New nonfiction from Rebecca Rolland: "A Letter to My Ten-Year-Old Daughter"

"Something terrible happened today."

"At my school?" you asked.

"No," I replied. "But at a school, yes."

You asked how far away it was. You sat and blinked hard. You asked whether you would be safe. You reminded me that a similar thing had happened before, a week ago, or ten days ago, you couldn't remember. You asked if a person could be shot and still live.

I sat with you and answered your questions. I tried to be as honest as I could.

But what I didn't tell you was that I had looked at the photos of the dead children and their teachers and saw in them your face, saw your upturned smile in their smiles, saw their hope and happiness and honor-roll certificates and thought of you. What I didn't tell you was how ashamed I felt having to have this conversation, how I couldn't in all honesty promise you safety, not when there were active shooter drills and active shooters.

And what I didn't say was how I write about empathy, teach empathy, but how empathy without compassionate action is never enough. It's not enough to feel the pain of others if we simply sit with that pain. It's not enough to have conversations that stay in our individual homes; that don't become broader conversations, and concrete acts in the world.



What I didn't tell you was how much a generation of mothers and fathers and grandparents and relatives are hurting, with the images of those dead on their hearts, and how much more the relatives of the dead are hurting, the lives of their loved ones become statistics. The number of children lost to gun violence, the number of shootings since the start of the year: all these statistics may be true. But they don't always help us see those children: the boy who wanted to spend the summer swimming, the girl proud of her grades, the gymnast who wore a bright pink bow and stared at the camera, confident of life ahead.

What I didn't tell you was how I can't bear, as part of this generation, to leave you and all the children your age with this crisis, a problem referred to as simply "intractable," as if gun violence were like the weather, and simply existed, no matter what.

Before this letter, I wanted to write about how to talk with children about gun violence, about how to assure them they are safe, but stopped. You are not safe, not completely; this we

know but cannot say. You are not protected from the horrors of this world.

And as I think about all the other families across this country, and all the other children and teachers fearful to go to school, I want to make one critical distinction. Yes, we need to sit with our children, to hear them out, to answer their questions as honestly, with as much care, as we can. Yes, we need as much patience as we can muster, and care, and time. But we need to do more than sit in the face of this overwhelming terror and death. We need the empathy to feel the pain of others, and then the empathy to take action for change. We need to promise our children they will be safer, not only because of our empathy, but because of the concrete changes we decide on collectively. We need to be able to face our children and, out of love and honesty and respect, tell them we will do more than empathize. Across the political spectrum, we must gather together, in horror and pain and grief, and then, we must model for our children that we can act.