



BREADTH

HOPE AND WORRY

Ian J. Barbash, MD, MS

Dr. Barbash (barbashij@upmc.edu) is an assistant professor of medicine in the Division of Pulmonary, Allergy, and Critical Care Medicine, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, Pittsburgh PA, and the UPMC Health System, Pittsburgh PA.

“THIS IS NOT A DRILL. Remember: Evacuate, Evade, Engage.” These words concluded an emergency alert system text message I received on Saturday, October 29, 2018, at 10:37 AM.

Awful words to read, warning me of an active shooter in the neighborhood near our downtown hospitals. As the message flashed across my cell phone, I was rounding in an intensive care unit (ICU) at a small hospital in an outer suburb. I was in no immediate danger, but I did not feel safe.

Over the coming hours I learned the horrible details. A man had burst into the Tree of Life Synagogue spewing anti-Semitic, hate-filled words. He executed 11 people in their house of worship on the Sabbath, and he injured the officers seeking to stop his rampage. The day before, my wife picked up our children from their daycare center—attached to a synagogue—just over half a mile away. She passed the Tree of Life on her way home, and we drive by it nearly every day. Was this really happening?

I confirmed that my wife and two small children were safe at home, in a different Pittsburgh suburb far from the morning’s tragic events. I tried to get back to the business at hand, supervising the care of critically ill patients. The day had started at 7:00 AM with a patient in cardiac arrest on one of the medical floors; he did not survive. As an intensivist, I confront death every day. For some patients, I keep death at bay with physiologic support while their failing organs recover; for others, I focus on alleviating suffering as death inevitably encroaches. But my work in the hospital does not prepare me for this death, which comes without warning and defies logical explanation.

Every day as a parent, I experience myself and witness in the two tiny people living with me a wide range of emotions. When I got home that Saturday, my wife and I embraced and cried silently while our oldest son watched cartoons. He seemed blissfully oblivious to the horror that had occurred so close to his preschool. Later,

he asked in his three-year-old voice, “Some people got hurt, Daddy. Did you see them get hurt?” I could barely answer.

I remember hearing that having children can feel like there is a piece of your soul wandering the world, terrifyingly defenseless against threats known and unknown. In the wake of the shooting I thought often of my boys—parts of my soul—running on the playground and reading in the classrooms of their Squirrel Hill daycare, unaware of what had happened just blocks away or what dangers might lurk outside.

After another week on service, I was back on daycare drop-off duty, but nothing about it felt routine or normal. As we walked into the building, we passed a friendly security officer stationed outside. On his face was a smile and on his hip a handgun; was I supposed to feel comforted that my children might be protected from an as-yet-unknown menace who meant them harm, or terrified that it now seemed necessary to have armed guards at a preschool?

I spend countless hours in the ICU talking with my patients and their families about expectations and uncertainty. I always hope that modern medicine can help my patients get better. I often worry that despite our best efforts they might not survive.

Now I find myself confronting hope and worry in my own world. I hope that the messages of love and unity in our city will drive out hate. I hope that public opinion and legislative action can keep weapons of mass destruction out of the hands of those that would do us harm. I hope that I never get one of those horrible phone calls.

But now, more than ever, I am keenly aware that my hope is uncertain. And so also, I worry.