

I Still Believe In Words

There's a sick and twisted irony in this.

On the morning of 1 October, 2017, I had the audacity to call myself a writer. That very night, my town was ripped apart. The city of lights, dimmed. But what happened in Las Vegas will not stay in Las Vegas this time. The stem of evil and arrogance responsible for the worst mass shooting in our nation's history has deep roots, and violence has never been outrun for long. What psalms or phrases, what songs or poems, can possibly reach us here tonight? But still, by some amazing grace, I believe in the music of words.

Guns are tools of violence designed to injure, harm, kill. Words, too, have the capacity to assault. A stinging rebuke might, like that burning bullet, report riotously through the air and propel brutally through blood and bone. But words were not designed to harm. Our language arose from a need to communicate, to warn, to protect, to thrive. Together. A gun has one purpose, and its ability to terrorize can be ended. Words are everlasting. I believe in the permanence of words. Last night, a thousand shots rang through the air, briefly muffling the chimes of liberty. They screeched and cawed through our neon night; this murder of crows blindly attacking its prey. Listen closely as the band stops playing and the revelers stop dancing. You'll hear firecracker pops silencing the crowd. But not for long. Soon, meeting the attack are words and arms, hands and hearts, feet pounding pavement and words, these words: *Run. Go. Hide. Get down.* Words of concern, of love, of caution and care. I believe in the power of words.

"Look for the helpers," said a kindly neighbor, once, who held our hands through a black and terrible night. "You will always find people who are helping." One madman with far too many weapons lay siege to a joyful crowd and quieted it for a moment. But when the din of gunfire ceased and the smell of iron was swept away, then on the winds and in the whispers of the Las Vegas valley, the silence was overwhelmed. The city's brief stillness was stirred by the words of helpers: *Where are you? I'm coming. What do you need? I'm here. Where can I donate? Don't give up.* The shots slowed. The terror ended. The words propel us forward. And I believe in the promise of words.

59 dead. 500 injured. Their voices stalled, stifled, stopped: But their memories will speak louder and ring truer and sing higher than the machine that so unthinkingly, so desperately and deliberately endeavored to mute their remarkable tones. The words they leave behind will reverberate through their friends and family, and through all of us who listen and remember. The chronicle of violence yawns dreadfully deep through the veins of our humanity, but the language of kin-folk and brotherhood is even deeper and more profound; it is steeped in the saga of friendship and fellowship, and its spine is a pillar of words that will not bend and will not break. I believe in the strength of words.

I looked into my students' eyes today, each and every one. Staring back at me were expressions of the same ancient, eerie echoes of shock and sadness, confusion and despair. *Words are my passion and my livelihood*, I told them, *but there are none for days like these.* And yet that admission opened the floodgates. Their words, spoken, became light in an unfathomable

darkness, and we anchored ourselves to them together. Answers were unimportant in the moment, but they will come someday. I believe in a new generation of words.

I am just happy to see your faces today. Was it enough to say that, for now, I wonder? To let them know that I am here, needing to be seen and heard, and that I can see and hear them there, too? When the sound of concern for those we love drowns out the noise of fear and hopelessness, then there is reason to hope, to believe, to carry on. We reach out and embrace each other, whatever the distance, with words of compassion and care and community. So, even at my most reticent, I believe in the symphony of words.