

Dear Lily,

Your mom and I had a long talk at work the other day. It was just after the latest round of shootings in our country, in San Bernardino, California, at a social service organization's meeting and holiday party. We were discussing what to post on Dougy Center's website and social media about supporting children and teens following (yet another) mass tragedy. We have a piece I wrote in December 2012 in response to the Sandy Hook School shootings in Connecticut, and we've revisited it a few times since, updating and adding the next, and the next, and the next tragedy to kind of keep it current. It's almost become — equally tragically — routine. As if we expect it, and when we do hear "there's been another shooting," we can find ourselves sinking into despair, or even feeling numb to it all. Sometimes we can't stop wondering: "What's happening here? How can we stop this?"

We have the slogans and movements following other attacks: Boston Strong, UCC Strong, Charleston Strong, SB Strong, Black Lives Matter, and...well, you get the picture. Sometimes it seems like we could just fill in the blanks: Another _____ has happened in _____ with _____ deaths and _____ injuries. The community has gathered together to be _____ Strong. I'm not putting these efforts down, I'm just saying that if they become routine, if we stop caring, or if we accept that these events are normal, we're giving up, and we're letting those who cause harm and pain win.

Your mom and I are sick about having to post things on our website about how to reassure children of their safety after yet another violent event. She shared with me that after the San Bernardino shooting you responded pretty much like this: Stop trying to convince me I'm safe; I don't feel safe!

I could run the numbers for you, the increasing statistics, but you probably have a good sense of them. And I'm sure we agree that even one death through violent means is one too many. You're 12 now, and what you think about and grapple to understand is much different from what you wondered about at 9, two-and-a-half years ago when your mom started working at Dougy Center. You've experienced the middle school struggles, the betrayal of friends, the shifting alliances in what's cool, what's not, who's "in" and who's "out," and you're seriously looking at the larger world in which we live. You know that bad things happen to good people, people who are living their lives in their ordinary places of work, attending school, the movies, out shopping.

Your mom, like parents everywhere, wants you to be safe, and she knows there are limits to that: She can't be with you every minute, and there are things beyond her control.

Lily, I wish I could tell you that if you're a good person, nothing bad will happen to you. I want to flood you with all kind of data about how you're more likely to be killed or injured in a car crash or walking down the street than by a terrorist attack, or a plane crash, or by someone who goes on a rampage with guns or knives. I ache to assure you that your gentle soul is immune from tragedy, that by caring as deeply as you do, people won't hurt you or let you down.

But there are sad realities, one of the starkest being that all of us — me, you, your mom, everyone you and I know — will eventually die. In between then and now, we'll have all kinds of experiences, both joyful and painful. Lots of things will happen to us that we have no control over, and we'll make decisions that turn out to be wise, along with ones that don't wind up so well. We'll accumulate more joy, and more loss; there's no way around that...it's called "living."

After more than 40 years at Dougy Center, bearing witness to stories of children as young as three, up through teens and into young adulthood, I've learned a lot from them. They all experienced the unfairness of someone in their lives dying too soon, too tragically, against how they imagined things would or should be.

I've learned that a lot of the things we worry about never happen, and that worry is a waste; it takes energy away from us doing things that really matter. It isn't easy not to worry, though, because bad and hard stuff does happen. We can't ignore it, but we can't let it wash away our hope either. Because we have so much access to information coming at us from so many sources in social media, it's hard to get away from the chaos sometimes, and we need to do that to keep perspective. It really is true that your odds of getting hurt or killed by a terrorist, or a mass murderer, are infinitesimally teeny.

I've learned that when bad things happen we couldn't control – whether they're private and personal, or global – we feel powerless. In fact, there are a lot of things we can't control, but we can control how we respond. The challenge we share, you at 12, me at 61, and everyone who cares, no matter their age, background, or upbringing, is to not give in to fear. To not let fear win.

How do we do that?

I'm not going to pretend to wave a magic wand and make this simplistic: you're way too smart and perceptive for that! But here are just a few things for your consideration.

Every act of kindness matters. It's easy to respond in anger or frustration when people hurt our feelings or behave badly. But then we're letting them control us. Instead, we can each make the daily commitment to be kind to others, even when they're not kind to us.

We can take solace in our friends, family, and community, and let them know we love and care about them. None of us know how long we'll be around, and I've heard many, many stories of regret following sudden and unexpected deaths. Love is stronger than fear.

Rather than sink into fear and give up, we can take action. We can show support: After the attacks in Paris people worldwide demonstrated their solidarity through putting the blue, white and red flag colors of France over their Facebook profile pictures, by sharing Jean Jullien's drawing of the Eiffel Tower in the traditional "peace symbol" on social media, and in all kinds of small and private acts of caring. None of that brings back people who've died, or heals people who've been wounded, but there is power in fighting violence with peace, and knowing that people all over the world care.

We can support the organizations and movements that we believe will help reduce these tragic events, by marching and donating and writing letters and showing up and being kind to our neighbors and people who annoy us, by accepting that although bad things happen, we can still see beauty and bring joy to others.

It all starts with each one of us.

With love and care,

