

WOMEN

Musket Fire

BY EM

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CW: Gun violence, school shooting

When I was an eighth grader, just turned fourteen, I encountered gun violence in schools for the first time. It was 1998 – a year before Columbine brought school shootings into the public consciousness. I was in band when there was an announcement that the school was on lock down – no one should leave or enter because there was an active shooter at Thurston High School, a few miles away. As I said, this was before school shootings became so tragically commonplace in the United States that students perform active shooter drills to prepare. It was an utterly unthinkable situation – terrifying, unprecedented, so much unknown and unknowable. There were no cell phones and there was only rudimentary internet so tween rumor, speculation and fear provided the first narrative. In the end we learned two students were killed and twenty-five others were wounded. It was a scar on my childhood, a moment that marked a clear “before” and “after” – not just for me, but for so many who lived part of their lives when students weren’t shot at, and part when they were.

Since that time school shootings have become nearly routine in my country. As a professor I now stand at the other end of the class room, theoretically in charge in an emergency. But I’m trained to teach history. I’m not an armed guard. I have never received guidance on how I could turn a decades-old University classroom into a makeshift bunker, or escape from painted shut windows should the need arise. I have on occasion brain-stormed an action plan with students but the hard truth is that if someone entered my classroom wielding a gun I, as the standing authority figure facing the door, would probably be the first target. I think about that every single time I stand up to lecture. I try to imagine where I could hide, whether I could text “I love you” to my family, if playing dead would only ensure my demise, or if it could work.

Sometimes pundits have proposed arming teachers so that we could exchange fire over the heads of our classes. Besides my own aversion to guns and violence, there is the wee problem of who I'd be shooting at – my own student. Sometimes my students drive me nuts. But I do invest a great deal of time, energy and love into their education. I care about them, a lot. I would not be able to turn on a dime from helping build their future one day to ending their life the next, even in a self-defense situation (for which I am, I add, not at all trained nor do I wish to be. I'm a teacher, not a commando.)

I do the same thing at Church — there are so many Church shootings here. How would I shield my children if a shooter entered my chapel? Could I brace myself shielding them against the wall, taking the bullet? Could we crawl under pews to an exit? These are the thoughts American teachers and parents have to have on a daily basis.

This is the background that I brought with me to reading Elder Holland's address to the faculty and staff of BYU from August 23 called "The Second Half of the Second Century." In it he repeatedly uses the violent metaphor of defending "the temple of learning" with musket fire. It is abundantly clear in context that he means this entirely metaphorically – he is not advocating that anyone physically shoot anyone else. However, his choice of metaphor, given the larger context of school violence, is terrible. There are already radicalized far-right extremists in this country, including high profile examples of Church members (dressed as Captain Moroni while committing sedition?) who are clearly armed and ready to act violently. Now we have the undesirable situation where DezNat and other violent extremists can point to three different apostles (Elders Maxwell and Oaks having been quoted by Elder Holland) seeming to approve of using gunfire to defend Church ideology. I find Elder Holland's remarks on the subject to be so dangerously distasteful I'm having a difficult time finding words emphatic enough to convey my feelings. When so many students and faculty have a fully justified fear of being killed in their classrooms, why on earth would you suggest that faculty and students should be prepared to take up arms against people they see as ideological enemies? And if you see yourself in the "enemy" camp of this talk, how could you feel safe going to Church, or a Church School, knowing that an apostle of God has urged Church employees to be prepared to (metaphorically) shoot you for your views? It makes me feel really, really awful and frightened and unwelcome.

Ironically he calls for an end to divisive imagery: "So, it is with scar tissue of our own that we are trying to avoid — and hope all will try to avoid — language, symbols, and situations that are more divisive than unifying at the very time we want to show love for all of God's children." I can only presume from context that he means divisive symbols like rainbows. What could be more unifying than shooting at those you disagree in the name of faith? Is there anything less contentious than categorizing a set of opinions as a threat and enemy of the Church, and that the holders of such opinions should get a round of musket fire? Rainbows are divisive. Gunfire is unifying. Got it.

Unfortunately Elder Holland does not content himself with vague references to defending the faith. He had to pick out a specific enemy. Can you guess? Give it a try! He quoted a letter from a parent: "You should know," the writer says, "that some people in the extended community are feeling abandoned and betrayed by BYU. It seems that some professors (at least the vocal ones in the media) are

supporting ideas that many of us feel are contradictory to gospel principles.” Hmm! I feel that way! I think that some vocal BYU professors have said abhorrent things contrary to the principles Christ taught in the Gospel. “Several parents have said they no longer want to send their children here or donate to the school.” Again, I’ve certainly questioned whether my tithing money should be used to support an institution that discriminates, and I’d hesitate to let my children be indoctrinated in a far-right rhetoric environment. But alas, he is not speaking to the allies of minority groups who have experienced discrimination, cruelty and exclusion. No, the real victims here are the “wounded students and parents who are confused about what so much recent flag-waving and parade-holding on this issue means.” The enemy that is assaulting the temple of learning, and needs to be repelled with metaphorical musket fire, are LGBTQIA students, parents and allies. As if that community were not already the targets of violence by radicalized conservatives, we now need to add apostolic voices seeming to advocate for exactly that. It’s unconscionable.

Elder Holland pays the lip service to love that is so commonly the prelude to taking profoundly unloving stances. “Too often the world has been unkind, in many instances crushingly cruel, to these our brothers and sisters. Like many of you, we have spent hours with them, and wept and prayed and wept again in an effort to offer love and hope while keeping the gospel strong and the obedience to commandments evident in every individual life.” Rhetorically there is a convenient little sleight of hand here – it is “the World” (a word that we commonly contrast to the Church, and which is vaguely “other”) which is too often unkind and crushingly cruel. Not Church leaders, or the Board of Trustees, or the students. It’s The World, so not us! We’re against The World! I won’t dispute that homophobia thrives outside the Church. But that aspect of worldliness is alive and well within our walls. Rooting it out vigorously would be a good balm for all those hours of weeping.

His plea over and over is for unity, which is a Godly goal. But his vision of unity serves only the people who already agree with him. There is no place in the fold for disagreement (those folks are guilty of taking aim and shooting north, to Salt Lake and the Church Office Building). Nor will the fold be in any sense willing to grow, change or accommodate. Unity is conformity. For instance, he decried a student at graduating speaking about sexual orientation: “If a student commandeers a graduation podium intended to represent everyone getting diplomas in order to announce his personal sexual orientation, what might another speaker feel free to announce the next year until eventually anything goes? What might commencement come to mean — or not mean — if we push individual license over institutional dignity for very long?” Commencement should represent the best of our values and should never represent a view that others would find painful, confusing, controversial or upsetting. Hmm. I would argue that BYU lost institutional dignity at commencement in 2007 when they gave an honorary doctorate to Dick Cheney, the unrepentant architect of torture. So Unity would mean progressive people being silent both about their own experience and when faced with their school lauding and rewarding a morally bankrupt man.

It is hard to imagine how one could ever be unified with people who suggested you deserve to be shot at for your point of view. Elder Holland says that after all the shooting is done (and presumably BYU wins) *then* we can beat our swords into ploughshares and “learn war no more.” This vision of unity

really just suggests a willingness to destroy or alienate anyone who disagrees until the only people that remain are of one mind. I do not believe that that is not what the Lord had in mind when he said "if ye are not one ye are not mine."

The tension between the teachings of current Church leaders and how progressive Mormons interpret Christ's teachings is a real issue. I'm not minimizing the scale of the disagreement – the defensiveness on one side and the pain of discrimination on the other are both exceedingly great. I do dream of unity, though it is hard to imagine how we could achieve that without a personal intervention and arbitration by the Savior. But I'll tell you one thing – you'll never ever achieve unity by glorifying killing people who disagree with you. Why on earth would I want to hear the perspective of people who can, with a straight face, claim in the same talk that they love me and want unity, but also it would be good for me to have a whiff of grapeshot (as long as we're using 18th century weaponry). I treasure some of the words that Elder Holland has spoken on very tender topics close to my heart. But this was dangerous, and badly done.

Note: Small spelling edit.