

## ALL MY HOPES

December 14, 2012

I grew up in Connecticut. I was born there. And despite having lived in Georgia for almost three dozen years, I still have vivid memories of the time I spent in Southern New England. Whenever campaigning politicians refer to the “heartland of America,” I am immediately reminded that there are no better examples of that ideal than the small, peaceful communities dotting the Connecticut countryside. The recent tragedy in Newtown involving the senseless slaughter of so many young children and their teachers has left me heartsick with grief, both as a father and as a grandfather. Yet as a mental health professional, in some ways I feel even worse.

It is difficult to contemplate the events at the Sandy Hook Elementary School and not be reminded of all the episodes of senseless violence we have recently endured. It is difficult to contemplate the loss of those precious young lives and not feel an overwhelming sense of futility and frustration. It is difficult to contemplate all the years of social and political bickering and posturing leading to inaction and not feel as if we have somehow lost ourselves. In the aftermath of this tragedy, it is patently clear that no one element caused it to happen. It was not just the ready access to military style weaponry. It was not just the mercenary promotion of violence and mayhem in all our popular media. And it was not just the failure of anyone to reach out and try to connect with a troubled young man. Indeed, the ultimate cause lies in the values that have come to prevail in our modern society that have made all this possible.

On the one hand, we put great value in our ever more rapidly advancing technology, which encourages us to be connected to dozens of places at once without being truly mindful of where we actually are. Many of us have come to be almost completely removed from human contact. And in this world of isolation, with its distorted view of reality, it is all too easy for mental health problems to fester and for miscommunications to become deeply held grudges. Yet, rather than advancing apace with our technology, our societal outlook on mental health care has remained rooted in a romanticized, albeit false, set of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century beliefs. In too many places, stress is still considered to be something reserved for women and weak-minded men. Mental health disorders are still seen as failures of character, while empathy and compassion are still considered signs of weakness. And the general notion still persists that if the problem is not physical, it is not real. In recent years in Connecticut, as in many other states, there have been significant cutbacks in funding for mental health facilities as a way of reducing “discretionary spending.” At federal, state, and local levels, the allocation of tax money consistently leaves mental health needs at the bottom of the list.

An unfortunate fact of history is that significant change is often prompted only after some devastating event. Given where we are in history, any real and enduring change must involve a major shift in our cultural mindset and priorities. Technology must be made to serve humanity, not the other way around. Comprehensive mental health services must be considered a necessity and not “discretionary.” And human connections must be fostered at every level so that electronic isolation is no longer a substitute for genuine human contact.

Significant changes in how we think and how we live can only be accomplished by a sustained campaign of radical re-education conducted on a massive scale. My hope is that the entire mental health community, which has often been fragmented and unfocused, will now come together and speak as if with one voice. My hope is that mental health professionals everywhere will double and triple their efforts to re-educate the public and the politicians. My hope is that others will join us in promoting this campaign for radical re-education. And, finally, my hope is that my grandchildren can live in a society in which tragedies such as the one in Connecticut remain a thing of the past.