

Compassion Story of the Month

With Brattleboro voting overwhelmingly to become part of the international Charter for Compassion, the Reformer and The Commons have agreed to publish a "compassion story of the month." This is the eighteenth. Information on submissions from Brattleboro area residents is offered below.

It was a Crime Against Humanity, Against Us, Against Me

Jim Levinson

"I been there, brother. I'm feelin' it with ya."

Of the many sentiments offered to me in recent weeks, these words, spoken by a recently released prison inmate with tears in his eyes, are ones I don't think I'll ever forget.

The Squirrel Hill community of Pittsburgh (the actual neighborhood of Mr. Rogers) has always been a tightly knit set of neighborhoods where, it seems, everybody is connected in some way to everybody else. Within the community, individual synagogues constitute their own mini-communities as do the schools. Once part of such a community, even those who migrate to other habitats always remain intimately connected.

I am one of those migrants, and the Tree of Life synagogue in Squirrel Hill was my shul.

A tragedy like that which enveloped Squirrel Hill in October gets its tentacles deep inside so many of us, not only those from Squirrel Hill, and certainly not only Jews. For me, it brought back so many memories, playing softball each evening on Shaw Avenue with a telephone pole serving as first base; walking with my friends to the Manor Theater on Saturday mornings to watch 17 cartoons; and working with schoolmates to collect supplies for kids in need.

Heartfelt messages of support have come from every chapter of my life: from family – some of whom I hadn't heard from in years; from a Taylor Allderdice high school classmate who's now living in England; from colleagues in Asia, Europe, and Africa with whom I've done international nutrition and public health work; and from former graduate students.

More locally, neighbors and friends have reached out, expressing shock, anger and sadness while offering so much kindness. I received touching and sympathetic messages and calls from members of the Brattleboro Area Jewish Community where I had the privilege to serve as spiritual leader for many years, from many of the

ministers in town and from local Muslim colleagues, from the Marlboro College community including its president who also has strong Pittsburgh connections, and from our spirited Compassionate Brattleboro committee. I was invited by the inimitable Becca Balint and Elizabeth Wohl to participate in the vigil they organized at Pocket Park near the Coop, to talk about the Squirrel Hill community and the synagogue, and to lead a prayer.

These often heartbreaking messages and calls touched me so deeply. Several told me that they wished with every fiber of their being that they could undo what had happened.

Of all these deeply touching offerings, two stand out most memorably in my mind. The first is the letter sent to the Reformer and the Commons by former Marlboro College President Tom Ragle, who captures, *perfectly*, what this tragedy has meant to so many of us. I offer it again for any of you who may have missed it:

The media has properly condemned the recent mass shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in the Squirrel Hill section of Pittsburgh as an act of anti-Semitism. I have a good friend in Marlboro who grew up in the Squirrel Hill section, attended that synagogue, and had his Bar Mitzvah there. Indeed, his uncle was the architect, and one of the victims was the first cousin of his sister's husband. Although I am a Christian, through my friend I have mourned my Jewish brothers and sisters.

But this was more than an act of anti-Semitism. It was a crime against humanity. I am human. It was a crime against my brothers and sisters, against me. Only when we are able to see a crime such as this not as a crime against Jews or Muslims or Blacks or Native Americans but an act against humanity, against us, against me, will we realize the peace we so desperately and unsuccessfully seek.

The second was the sentiment related above, part of a deeply-felt conversation with a recently released prison inmate. It has long struck me that for many of these folks who had hit rock bottom (something rarely experienced by those of us on the outside) and who have had the good fortune to be surrounded by caring and kindness on the way back up, some remarkable transitions have been possible. Sometimes it's a new capacity to listen actively, sometimes an ability to openly express vulnerability, often the gift to be able to express empathy in a way that is beyond heartfelt.

It was just such vulnerability and deep empathy that this friend expressed so poignantly.

To him, and to all of you, I say thank you....and Amen.

Submissions, from Brattleboro area residents, for future publication, not to exceed 650 words, should be emailed to: compassionstory@gmail.com or mailed to: Compassion Story of the Month, c/o Robert Oeser, PO Box 6001, Brattleboro, VT 05302. Please include your name, address, phone number and email address. Earlier submitted stories will automatically be considered in subsequent months.