

# Learning how to filter tragedy for a child's view of the world



Melissa Favara

Melissa Favara teaches English in Vancouver and lives and writes in North Portland, where she parents Ramona, age 6, hosts a bi-monthly reading series, and counts her husband and her city as the two great loves of her life.

Friday morning, Dec. 14, I was in my old Volvo driving around Vancouver, WA, trying to find my colleague Alyssa's house — her daughter, Sophia, was selling me her barely-used "Pink Cadillac" bicycle for \$50 for Ramona's Christmas gift; I was annoyed that I'd taken a wrong turn, anxious about fitting the bike into the car, trying to work out when I'd give it to Ramona since we couldn't pack it along to the family holiday in Ashland. And then I turned on the radio. I don't have to tell you what I heard.

I pulled over, and my mind ran to Ramona, and what she'd be doing at 1:30 p.m. in her safe little school in Northeast Portland — her Spanish lesson, playing with AJ, the class bearded dragon, making a collage with her best friend Twylo. I didn't go as far as imagining a sick, violent adult entering that scene — the way you pull down that blue screen in your mind when something is too awful to imagine. I bought the bike and hid it in the basement, and picked up Ro. In the car, Ramona reported, whistling through her missing two front teeth, "I practiced my hula hoop at recess!" So we talked about that, and who was taking AJ home for the holiday break, and how stinky it was when AJ pooped at our house during our turn caring for him last weekend. We listened to a CD instead of the radio.

My husband and I decided that night, after dinner with Ro, bath, and reading Harry Potter until she fell asleep, that we would not tell Ramona about the shooting. We couldn't see what use it would serve except to make her afraid—this is, after all, the child who, having learned that hippos are dangerous if you're in a small boat in a river and bump into one, burst into tears in the fear that she'd meet an unfriendly hippo in the bathtub. Yet the thought nags that she'll hear of it — and how do we talk about it if and when she does?

The Newtown shooting is the first terrible instance that I might have to explain to Ramona, my crafty, healthy, roller-skating, Chutes & Ladders-playing baby, who is really not a baby, and old enough now to hear about things. I don't know what to say, among so much being said. I don't know how to say it.

The day after the shooting, before I could begin to grapple with the urge to swaddle my 6-year-old in bubble wrap (many of the victims of the Newtown tragedy were 6, like my kid — missing teeth like my kid — newly minted, probably contrary, unpredictable

humans like my kid), I continued to struggle with the questions that are still new to me as a late-blooming parent: Where and when will she learn of it? Am I protecting her by shielding her from what happened, or am I putting her in danger by not putting her through safety drills? Do I keep her innocence safe — or must I share with her what terrible things happen, try to equip her to cope with the terrible?

This being 2012, I made a late-night post to Facebook sharing that I was at a loss—was it OK to keep Ramona ignorant of what happened? The responses were interesting and useful, contemplative, respectful. More on that in a minute.

It's the larger national discussion that disturbs me. A day after the shooting, NPR hosted a talk featuring a gun control advocate and a gun rights advocate. President Obama has spoken several times over the last week, and the transcripts have been published online, and people have commented on his words.

On NPR, the gun lobbyist said, "We didn't talk about box-cutters after 9/11; we don't talk about banning cars after every accident; we shouldn't be revisiting the misuses of a tool to deprive law-abiding Americans of it." These facile words, "Guns don't kill people—people kill people," grate. We *did* change everything about air travel after 9/11 — millions of people every year get scanned. We made it harder to take down a plane, because that was a clear threat, as mass shootings are. And Americans are required to complete serious training to get a license to drive. My Ramona doesn't know about any of this, but someday, she will. When she's older, I can share with her my frustration that after 20 children and six educators were slain, the reaction of too many people was to rush to protecting the right to bear arms, even though those arms are too often leveled against our innocent children, parents and allies.

President Obama said in his address on Sunday, "This is our first task, caring for our children. It's our first job. If we don't get that right, we don't get anything right. That's how, as a society, we will be judged. And by that measure, can we truly say, as a nation, that we're meeting our obligations? Can we honestly say that we're doing enough to keep our children, all of them, safe from harm?"

Many people reiterated in the forums I've scanned that gun rights trumped all. I look at my sleeping kid tonight. I'm puzzled.

Don't we all want our kids to be safer? Isn't it obvious, here in Portland, a city whose police force the Justice Department has reprimanded and asked for reforms from after multiple police shootings of the mentally ill, that we have work to do to head off tragedy with a better social safety net, available treatment for the mentally ill, and limiting access to the kinds of "tools" that can leave many dead fast? No one in his right mind would have committed Newtown. No one so ill could have done so much damage so quickly without a semi-automatic.

The first clear concept of death that Ramona's gotten is how Harry Potter's parents died saving his life. It's to be talked about. My friends on Facebook had great, loving ideas on the shooting. One said that, given the escalation of shootings, it might be good to teach Ramona, "If X happens, do Y." One said, "Bubble-wrap that girl as long as you need to, talk when it feels right." And one shared how her Buddhist priest shared with her temple, 250 including the kids, what had happened, inviting a moment of silence. This is what she wrote about what she'd teach her kids:

"Life is fragile. Life is uncertain. Life is to be appreciated. People are not always good. The lost are to be remembered. The desperate are to be treated with compassion and attention, lest they become more desperate. There are problems in individuals and in our society that have dramatic negative consequences. And it's always good to have a plan for emergencies."

We'll get there. For now, we discussed Harry Potter over dinner tonight. Ramona remembered that Harry was alive and very powerful; we remembered that he was so because his parents sacrificed themselves. "And they loved him so much, their love saved him," I offered. I wish that my love could keep Ramona safe, but it can't always. We'll have to talk about that.

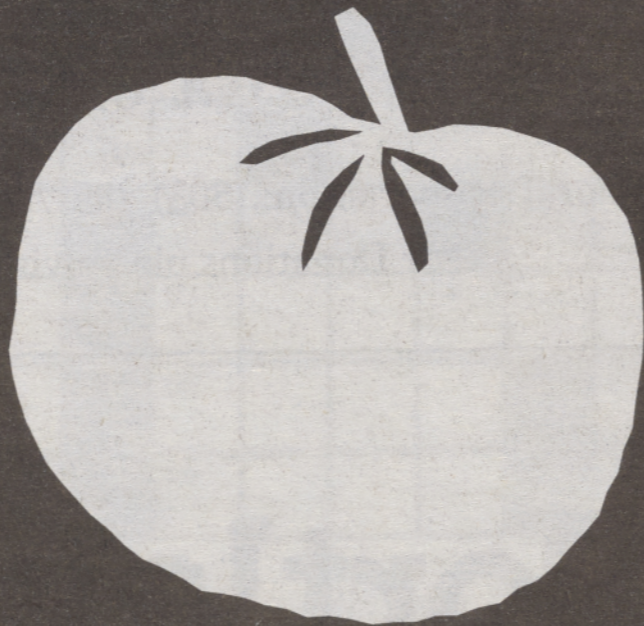
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