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ON EMPATHY

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Professor Wheeler discusses the deadly mass shooting of June 12, 2016, in Orlando, Florida, and his belief that more empathy is needed in the world. Wheeler then relates, through personal anecdotes, his own journey toward empathy. He concedes that there is no recipe for empathy, but believes that sharing personal stories can spur conversation, thinking, and collective action.

Introduction

On the evening of June 12, 2016, I landed at Boston’s Logan Airport at a little after 6:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time. I was frankly exhausted. I was returning from Dublin having attended my first British and Irish Association of Law Librarians (BIALL) Conference held during four of the six days I spent in Dublin. Generally, when I do conferences, I am all in. So I was sleep deprived and anxious about the mountains of work waiting for me at my day job. Nevertheless, I felt inspired about the profession of law librarianship. I had met numerous U.K. colleagues whom I felt certain I would now call lifelong friends. I had discovered visionary vendors developing exceptional research tools. I had partied like a fool, and I had learned so much! All of these things were running through my head when my Aer Lingus flight touched down in Boston and I turned on my cell phone.

Immediately, I recognized the small chime indicating I had received a text message. It was from my friend Elaine Manning in Detroit, and it read, “Just checking on u after watching the news. U ok?” I found this odd for several reasons. First, although Elaine is a delightful friend of mine, I would hardly call us close. In fact, this was only the second text message I’d ever received from her. But, more important, I wondered what danger she thought I might be in and what news she was referring to.

My first reaction to that text message was fear! Since September 11, 2001, I have a dread of broadcast news telling of disasters. I am especially fearful of somehow missing disastrous news because of work, travel, or my unavoidably human preoccupation with the mundane realities of everyday life. So my reply text was

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1. Cataloging Assistant, University of Detroit Mercy School of Law Library, Detroit, Michigan.
2. Rather than use correct punctuation and spelling here, I chose to transcribe the text message verbatim in the not uncommon text jargon used by my friend Elaine.
written with shaking and fearful hands. I replied “Yes, I am fine. Just landed from trip to Ireland. What news?” I then recalled a Facebook post from my friend Jocelyn Stilwell-Tong from earlier in the day, which I couldn’t figure out. It read “What horrible news to wake up to. My Florida friends, my LGBTQ friends . . . . My heart goes out to you.” So now I was really scared. As people began deplaning around me, I sat back down, and I searched Google until I came across the New York Times online headline “Orlando Gunman Attacks Gay Nightclub, Leaving 50 Dead.”

¶4 As I read the news, I lost track of my surroundings, trying to comprehend the words on my tiny cell phone screen. I read the sentences slowly as if that would help make them more comprehensible. I read them again, thinking that I surely missed the point, the motivation, the explanation contained there somewhere within the story. I was finally approached by an Aer Lingus flight attendant instructing me to please deplane. I exited the plane dazed and lacking understanding.

¶5 I walked through the airport and somehow arrived at the correct baggage claim carousel, and I again read the online news stories covering the Orlando shooting of June 12, 2016. I posted a Facebook message in an attempt to communicate my feelings, express my condolences, voice my disbelief, and acknowledge having heard the news. Then came my tears. Yes, I am that guy who sometimes cannot hold back the tears. So there I stood among the mostly Irish American travelers, in the Aer Lingus baggage claim area at Boston Logan Airport, and I cried.

Empathy

¶6 Once I pulled myself together, collected my suitcase, found a taxi, and began my ride home, I started to wonder about empathy. Why empathy? What is empathy? The Oxford English Dictionary defines empathy as “[t]he quality or power of projecting one’s personality into or mentally identifying oneself with an object of contemplation, and so fully understanding or appreciating it. Now rare.” The more contemporary definition listed is “[t]he ability to understand and appreciate another person’s feelings, experience, etc.” I think a lot about empathy because, quite honestly, I am lucky enough to see quite a bit of it demonstrated by the exceptional people with whom I surround myself. I am also regularly shocked by how little empathy exists in the world today. I am horrified by the regular acts of violence, hatred, and murder that evince an absence of empathy. I wonder whether empathy is the cure for these ills. I also wonder what builds empathy. What makes

3. Law Librarian, California Court of Appeal, Sixth Appellate District, San Jose, California.
4. Jocelyn Stilwell-Tong, FACEBOOK (June 12, 2016, 8:00 AM) (on file with author).
6. My post read, “Just landed in Boston after a fabulous time in Dublin, and I am just reading the news of the Orlando shooting. Trying not to shed my tears here at Logan Airport. My heart is broken like our gun laws thinking of 50 dead young people whose lives ended on the bloody floor of a gay nightclub. For what? Orlando you have my condolences.” Ronald E. Wheeler, Jr., FACEBOOK (June 12, 2016, 6:35 PM) (on file with author).
8. Id.
me that guy who cries in an airport while others never seem compelled to do so? Can there ever be too much empathy? What causes people to lack empathy? Can empathy be legislated? Some countries have tried by outlawing hate speech of various types. I may never be able to answer any of these questions, but I have thought a lot about myself and what makes me this version of Ron Wheeler. I also have a great therapist with whom I talk regularly about these things, so I have reason to believe I have a degree of understanding about my own journey toward empathy. Since I really do find empathy to be perhaps the most important ingredient lacking in the world today, I offer here an examination of my own journey toward empathy. I offer it as part of our ongoing Diversity Dialogues.

Empathy, Poverty, and Homelessness

¶7 My first memory of receiving a lesson in empathy occurred when I was three or four years old. I can pinpoint my age because I know that my parents moved into the home I grew up in on Detroit’s west side in 1968 when I was four. This memory occurred before that time, when we lived with my grandparents on Detroit’s east side. It is odd because I have very few memories, only a handful in fact, from so early in my childhood. But I have always had a vivid memory of this incident, which inexplicably had a profound impact on me.

¶8 I was walking down a crowded street in downtown Detroit with my father, Big Ron, and my grandfather, Charles Sr. I spent a lot of time during my childhood with my mother and grandmother, mostly because the men were always working. Earlier in his life, my grandfather had become the first in our extended family to graduate from high school and thus achieved the highest level of education in the family. He nevertheless often had to work multiple jobs to support his wife and two children. By the time of this incident, he worked as a chauffeur for Wayne State University’s Merrill Palmer Institute. He often drove professors or distinguished speakers around the city of Detroit or to the Detroit Metropolitan Airport located just west of the city. He therefore often worked odd hours. My father worked several odd jobs before landing his job at Ford Motor Company in late 1967 or 1968. At Ford he often worked overtime and regularly worked midnight or afternoon shifts. Although my father went to great lengths to spend time with my sister and me each and every day, this extended outing felt special.

¶9 As we walked, I recall perceiving that we’d crossed into a neighborhood that felt unfamiliar. As we continued, I began understanding that there was more to this feeling than unfamiliarity. I didn’t feel unsafe, because at that age I felt so loved, so


10. We have three men named Charles and two men named Ronald in my family, which confuses most people. My father is Ronald Sr. or Big Ron, and I am Ronald Jr. or Little Ron. My grandfather is Charles Sr., my uncle is Charles Jr. or Chuck, and my cousin is Charles III or Little Charlie.

11. The institute still exists as the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute at Wayne State University. It is a research institute studying child and family development. For more information, see Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute, WAYNE STATE UNIV., http://mpsi.wayne.edu/ [https://perma.cc/6EGC-J39R].
safe, and so protected when in the company of my Dad and my Daddy. I did think something was odd. I recall smelling what I now know was urine. The street was dirty and contained more litter than I was used to seeing on city streets. Nevertheless, I was primarily focused on seeing the sights and trying to understand the adult conversation going on between my father and my grandfather. I also knew I wanted their attention. I wanted them to notice me. I wanted to be the focal point, to say something witty, and to receive their praise. I have a very vivid memory of seeing a man dressed in tattered clothing, sitting on the ground leaning against a streetlight post. He smelled bad, and he looked dirty. I don’t recall ever seeing something like this before. As we walked past, the man blurted out something directed at us. I assume he asked us for money. I recall his words were slurred, his breath smelled strongly of what I now know was alcohol, and his teeth were badly discolored. Encountering a man like this was new and intense and provocative and interesting. I knew not how to respond to all of these things. Yet, I did respond. I have no idea why I did so, but my childish response was to laugh.

¶10 What has become unforgettable is the response I got from my father and grandfather. Their response was swift and focused and intense. It was harmonious, and one man’s response built on the other’s. I recall the increased volume, the firmness, and the disbelief in their voices. I recall knowing that this was something important, that I had made a grave mistake, that I had to listen carefully because nothing thus far in my life (to my childish recollection) mattered quite as much as this. They stopped walking. My father bent down to look into my eyes. He held me by both of my shoulders, and he said, “There is nothing funny about this.” That was the opening line of what I now recall as a public lecture, a talking-to, a dressing down, right there on a public street, and right there in front of the panhandler.

¶11 Of course I don’t recall each and every word of what the two men said. I have more of a visual picture. However, I do know that I never forgot the message that came through loud and clear that day. Part of that message was that hunger, poverty, and homelessness are not laughing matters. Moreover, these problems are common and tragic and easily acquired by anyone. I recall my grandfather asking me, “Do you think you are better than him?” He asked me, “Don’t you know that this could easily be you?” He went on to convey that any of us, anyone in our family, any of the people whom we loved could become like this man before us at any time. I remember his message was that you don’t laugh at people like this. On the contrary, you must do whatever you can to help them.

12. At that time we lived with my grandparents. This grandfather, Charles Sr., is the man whom my father and mother referred to as Dad. My sister and I picked up that name. Thus, we also began calling my grandfather Dad. We therefore called my father Daddy. We both call Big Ron by the name Daddy to this day.

13. I use the word “panhandler” here as a way to describe a person others might refer to with more derogatory terms like “bum,” “vagrant,” “homeless person,” “drunkard,” or “derelict.” I chose the term “panhandler” because it describes what he was doing and does not draw conclusions about who he is or why he is there. It is also, increasingly, the language of the law. See, e.g., CAL. PENAL CODE § 647 (West, Westlaw through Ch. 22 of 2016 Reg. Sess.); MASS. GEN. LAWS ANN. CONST. pt. 1, art. 16 note (West, Westlaw through amendments approved June 1, 2016); N.Y. PENAL LAW § 240.35 (McKinney’s West, Westlaw through L. 2016, chapters 1 to 64) (examples of state statutes using the word “panhandler”).

14. Counterintuitively, these powerful moral lessons, which some might describe as religious, were taught to me by the two men in my family who were never baptized and who both rejected organized religion.
extremely long lecture and public talking-to, I vividly recall that both my father and my grandfather shook the panhandler’s hand and spoke with him in respectful tones, and they each gave him money. Today, almost fifty years later, I recall that scene each and every time I encounter homelessness, alcoholism, poverty, and the like.

I tell this story because I credit it as the source of my empathy toward people living in poverty, the homeless, and the addicted. I know there is more to it than that, but I also know that it was my father and grandfather who both stressed the importance of empathy, compassion, and giving even to those whom you do not like or understand. They taught me not to judge but to accept and to help whenever possible. Each of them had difficult upbringings characterized by times of poverty, abuse, mistreatment, illness, disrespect, and oppression. Each of them also created families filled with love (to the extent possible), compassion, and empathy. So for me, they provided at least some of the pieces to the empathy development puzzle. For me, the nurture component or the early teaching of compassion and empathy was significant.

Mental Illness and Empathy

My mother struggled with mental illness for most of her adult life. She was schizophrenic. She had her first psychotic break days after my sister’s birth in 1963 when, my father reports, she handed her newborn daughter over to him and asked, “Whose baby is this?” That day was when my father discovered that his new wife was mentally ill.

So what did that mean for me and my childhood? Oddly enough, it meant that I have memories that are incredibly wonderful and others that are quite sad. My mother was exceedingly loving, and the people she cared most about in the world were her two children. All of her efforts in life, including her ongoing struggle to stay sane, to stay mentally healthy, and to remain fit for society, were driven by her need to be there for her children. My mother was never violent toward us, she was never suicidal, and she was never irrationally angry or anything like that. She held clerical jobs for most of her life having achieved only a twelfth grade education. She was in so many ways an idyllic mother who ensured that we always had hot meals (even hot breakfasts), we had clean clothing, we were hugged and kissed.

15. Seeing them hand a stranger money made a lasting impact on me because I was always aware that money was not plentiful in our household and that the adults all worked really hard at difficult jobs to earn money.

16. Since my mother’s death in 2007, I have decided to speak openly about her mental illness because I believe shedding light on mental illness can help reduce the societal stigma and misinformation that abounds. Mental illness is not uncommon. See Mental Health By the Numbers, NAMI: Nat’l Alliance on Mental Illness, https://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-By-the-Numbers [https://perma.cc/UPB9-BMDS] (providing statistics such as “Approximately 1 in 25 adults in the U.S.—10 million, or 4.2%—experiences a serious mental illness in a given year that substantially interferes with or limits one or more major life activities.”).

17. See Mental Health America, http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/conditions/schizophrenia/ [https://perma.cc/UFR3-CZLL] (defining schizophrenia as “a serious disorder which affects how a person thinks, feels and acts. Someone with schizophrenia may have difficulty distinguishing between what is real and what is imaginary; may be unresponsive or withdrawn; and may have difficulty expressing normal emotions in social situations.”).
daily, and we felt loved. She helped with our homework, she taught us to read before we went to school, and she kept our house as clean as she could. When early in the preschool portion of my childhood, I was diagnosed with hyperactivity disorder, she worked tirelessly playing games and doing exercises with me to help lengthen my attention span so that I would be better able to “sit still and listen” when I entered kindergarten. She communicated in so very many ways how much she loved me, and luckily, I carry that love with me even today.

¶15 My mother was also quirky. I recall knowing at a very early age that she was prone to saying odd things. I’m not sure how I knew what was odd and what was not. I just knew. She also was not like other moms. She was not a big laugher. She often smiled and chuckled, but I recall that when she really cracked up, which I only remember happening a handful of times, it made the whole room laugh. It infected everyone. I remember that she sometimes missed the point, or at least she saw things differently from others, and perhaps that made me uneasy about what she might say. I sometimes found her embarrassing, but I also knew that everyone, including all of my friends, loved her. She would regularly have psychotic breaks characterized by her inability to sleep. These breaks would lead to and often culminate in her acting oddly or acting “crazy” and being hospitalized. She would be hospitalized for about a week during which time her medications would be adjusted and she would rest. This happened every few years for most of her adult life. I have memories of my sister and me coloring in hospital waiting rooms while my father went upstairs to visit her in the locked ward where children were not allowed.

¶16 In retrospect, these psychotic breaks were never anything frightening or threatening, and we knew what they were because my father talked to my sister and me about them. He talked openly with us about her odd actions and that she was mentally sick. He never used judgmental language or cast blame. He was clear that we were lucky to be able to get her medical help. He stressed that she still loved all of us, and that she deserved our love and our help. More than once, when things got bad, she sat on the sofa and had conversations with her dead mother. Another time she took a walk around the block in her nightgown. These things never prompted fear in me. I was clear that the goal was to try to ensure that the neighbors didn’t see or hear her odd behaviors and to get her help. My father asked us to think about what it would be like to lose control of your mind and what you would

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18. The terms now used are Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). See AD/HD and Adults, MENTAL HEALTH AMERICA, http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/conditions/adhd-and-adults [https://perma.cc/6JMY-J94H], for a fuller definition and discussion of these disorders.

19. This memory sounds so sad and terrible, but that is not how I remember it. It was just part of our lives. It was like waiting in a dentist’s office or waiting anywhere else where adults had to conduct business. Until my tween years, there were no negative emotions attached to these visits other than sadness that I could not see my mother.

20. My father had incredibly good medical insurance provided by Ford Motor Company, so affording care was thankfully never an issue. However, things were always changing as treatments changed and as the laws governing the mentally ill evolved. In the 1960s, my mother was given electroshock treatments, which were in vogue then. Also, my father was able to sign her into psychiatric facilities without her consent in the 1960s; later only she could sign herself into a residential psychiatric facility. See Herbert Hendin, Suicide in America 214 (1996) (noting that until the first third of the twentieth century or later in most jurisdictions, all committals to public psychiatric facilities and most committals to private ones were involuntary).
want from others. Today I know that living with and watching my mother’s struggles taught me so much about empathy and compassion and how misperceptions and ignorance about mental illness fuel anger and fear and hatred and draconian public policies that demonize and underserve those in need of mental health treatment.

¶17 I mention these events here because each and every time I encounter some facet of mental illness, and I do so regularly, I think about my mother and her struggles. I think of the mentally ill as somebody’s mother, sister, child, or parent. I picture myself in the shoes of the mentally ill, and I think about how I would feel if I were them. I think about what I would need from others if I lost track of reality, and I ask myself how I can help others who have. In fact, I have had employees who have struggled with mental health issues, and I am sure that my mother’s experiences made me a more compassionate supervisor. I want to be clear about my intent here. I offer these thoughts not as proof of being somehow more evolved than anyone else, but because I want to tell about my personal journey toward empathy with the hope that it will inspire others on their journeys.

Religion and Empathy

¶18 This part of the story of my journey toward empathy is particularly painful. It exposes me as a bad actor who carried around hatred. It sheds light on how I used hatred as a weapon against hatred, and I caused even more pain. It involves stories of me lashing out in anger and pain. I find this part of my personal journey ugly and embarrassing and base and ignorant. It is also incredibly human and has many parallels to the violence we see in the world today.

¶19 Sometime around 1983 I came out fully, to myself, as a gay man. One of the very first people I came out to before my parents was my sister, whom I recall having no particular issues with my sexual orientation whatsoever. A few years later, my sister became born again.21 Much of that time is unclear in my mind, and I am absolutely sure her version of this story might be told differently, but in the following years, our relationship became severely strained. We lived in different cities, we did not talk often, and we struggled when we did. I recall that we corresponded via snail mail, and I admit that I wrote numerous terrible and hate-filled letters to her, which I now wish were never sent. We had grown up liberal Catholics, and I carried around a large sense of personal pride in my ongoing work to be Christ-like, although I no longer attended Catholic masses. So when my sister told me numerous times and in numerous ways that I was going to hell because I am gay, it hurt me in ways that I had never anticipated.

¶20 What ensued was a war of words and a war of wills that left emotional scars on my entire family. I was not a victim in this war. I actively participated, I vehemently hated, I fought unfairly, I hurled insults, I cried real tears, and I suffered. At some point during this war, my sister and I stopped speaking to each other alto-

21. See Born Again, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Born_again [https://perma.cc/5EM4-Z5JL] (“In some Christian movements [especially Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism], to be born again is to undergo a ‘spiritual rebirth,’ or a regeneration of the human spirit from the Holy Spirit. This is contrasted with the physical birth everyone experiences.”).
gether, and that was when my real suffering began. I thought I could hate my way through it. I was, after all, the wronged party. I was morally right. I had the moral high ground. I was truth. I was being unfairly targeted due to my sexual orientation, and that fact justified my use of hate as a weapon and a shield. I was, after all, using hate to combat hate. I recall an incident in 1997 or so when, while talking to my mother about my hatred of my sister, I began to cry uncontrollably, and I recall breaking down and breaking dishes and just sobbing in her arms.

¶21 My sister and I did not speak to each other for about two years, and during that time, I really learned how to hate. Hate put me to sleep at night, and hate drove me to wake up in the morning and brainstorm new depths of hatred. I became obsessed by hatred. I was addicted to it. It thrilled me, and it drove me to recklessness in other aspects of my life. I drove myself, through hate, into darkness and despair. What I became was exactly the person I did not want to be. I began to hate myself.

¶22 One day, after numerous conversations with everyone I loved, I decided I hated being unhappy. I hated being driven by hatred. I hated what I had become. The only way out for me was to let go of the hate, and that only worked if I found a way to forgive my sister for her part in this war. Forgiveness is a tricky thing because true forgiveness must happen without any expected outcomes or reciprocation. I had to say to my sister, “I forgive you for hurting my feelings, and I do so no matter what you believe about a god or about a hell or about my sexual orientation.” I did not think I could do it, and some days I slip, but I forgave.

¶23 What I now believe is that empathy could have prevented this war. Religious zealots of the homophobic variety could have their beliefs if they also found a way to have empathy for LGBTQ people. I don’t want to get into anyone’s head or mandate anyone’s beliefs. What I do want is compassion and caring and empathy. If religious zealots of that ilk began volunteering in LGBTQ service organizations, providing support and mentoring for LGBTQ youth, doing any direct service work in the LGBTQ community and demonstrating love, compassion, and empathy, it would be the greatest and most powerful evangelical tool they’d ever imagined. Conversely, if I had chosen to ignore the hateful words “you are going to hell” and found empathy for my sister, I would have saved myself a decade of unhappiness. Had I dug deep and tried harder to understand the ordeals she may have been going through; had I investigated the people and the issues, beyond the two of us, that might have motivated those words; had I found empathy and compassion; I might have curated some sort of peace. Today, I think about how hard it would be to be one of those religious zealots who feel morally compelled to shout insults at gays, to shout insults at pregnant youth outside of Planned Parenthood centers, or to follow hateful evangelical leaders. It doesn’t make me angry and hateful when I see these types of people today. It just makes me very, very sad. I think, what if I really believed that my God compelled me to do such horrible things? What would I want from others if I were that person? My answer is always compassion and caring and empathy. To this day, I wish I had known the way I do today that those words, “you are going to hell,” were far less about me than about her and her life and her need for compassion and empathy and understanding. Yet, sadly, those were the exact things that I was ill equipped to give at that time.
¶24 People of seemingly divergent religious beliefs have two paths to harmony, and each requires empathy. First, they must visualize themselves in the other’s position. What if I felt driven to kill others by my version of God? How horrible that would be. But, what if I did? What would stop me? For me, the answer is always love, compassion, understanding, and empathy. The act of visualizing oneself as another is the only effective way I have found to begin recognizing the humanness of another. Get to that place, and the rest will come. Second, to get to that place of harmony, people must accept that there is more than one absolute truth, even in religion. My sister’s absolute truth is hers to have, and it is indeed absolute. It is hers, and I must respect it. She feels as absolutely morally right in her truth as I do in mine, and she gets to have that as much as I get to have mine. However, empathy has allowed us, to the extent that we can, to step around those absolute truths and that moral rightness to get to the human beings underneath. Somewhere along the line we, the human race, forgot how to revel in or celebrate the diversity of truths in the world. Now instead we fight wars. Empathy for others with whom we vehemently disagree allows us to find respect, to refrain from judging, and to find commonality where it exists. My relationship with my sister is far from perfect, and I admit that we probably don’t really understand each other. We don’t talk often. However, we are no longer at war, and I can live with that. I wish her every happiness.

¶25 There is a particularly moving quote by Rumi, the thirteenth-century poet, jurist, Islamic scholar, theologian, and Sufi mystic. I think his words may be the key to everything. He wrote: “Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there. When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about. Ideas, language, even the phrase each other doesn’t make any sense.”

Orlando

¶26 So I stood in the airport and cried. I cried real tears, and I cried hard. I didn’t want to cry, I was embarrassed about crying, I felt alone in my grief as I stood there in the Aer Lingus baggage claim area with tears running down my face. That embarrassment has made me think about why it is that I always have to be that blubbering guy. But today, after a night of rest, I really do feel proud to be that guy. I honestly do not know how to be anything else except that guy, and I never want to become anyone other than my most authentic me. When I see tragedy, when I encounter people in pain, people in need, people who are troubled, I feel for them. I can’t help it, I just feel it. I wish we could all feel that way. If we did, we might minimize the mass shootings that occur in this country. We might also stop debating with each other about heartfelt issues and just accept each other and our own personal truths. That is what empathy could offer us.

¶27 I feel compelled to add here that for me the greatest tragedy of the Orlando shooting is the ages of those killed. I have read through numerous websites that

detail both photos and biographies of those killed.\textsuperscript{23} They feature such flattering photos of young men and women, ages thirty-four, twenty-two, twenty-three, thirty-six, twenty-two, twenty-six, and so on. Young people with hopes and dreams and goals and passions. These young people were our future. I lived through the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s, where I saw scores of young gay men and other young people, including all of my close friends, die in their twenties and thirties. My hope was that I would never experience anything similar again. So today to be faced with something like this is heart wrenching. The Orlando shooting is “the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history.”\textsuperscript{24} It is also “the worst act of terrorism on American soil since September 11, 2001, and the deadliest attack on a gay target in the nation’s history.”\textsuperscript{25} Where do we go from here? I say, we go toward empathy.

Conclusion

\textsuperscript{¶28} My journey toward empathy thus has had three identifiable parts. For me, part of the equation was the nurture component. By that I mean being taught, at an early age, about empathy and compassion toward others. That is what I hoped to illustrate with my memories of my father and grandfather. Another component for me was witnessing a loved one struggle with severe difficulties like my mother’s mental illness. I continue to draw on those memories as a source of compassion. The third identifiable component for me has been personal struggle and personal pain of the type my sister and I have experienced in the past. Of course, there is no roadmap to empathy, and there is no magic pill. Nevertheless, I felt compelled to offer the world something in the aftermath of the events of June 12, 2016, in Orlando. My hope is that my journey toward empathy, one that I am still traveling, can be instructive or at least thought provoking for others.


\textsuperscript{25} Id.