Responding to Tragedy

BY DALE WEISS

When significant news events occur, usually my first reaction is “How will I teach this to my students?” This was the question I asked myself on Aug. 5, 2012, when an assailant shot and killed six members of the Sikh community at their temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. I felt such sadness and horror on hearing of this atrocity. At the same time, I realized how very little I knew about Sikhs: Who are they? What do they believe? And why would someone kill them?

A week following the tragedy, the Sikh temple was reopened to the public. I felt compelled to attend this service, but I was nervous, too. Was it safe? I could barely imagine the fear that many Sikhs must have felt re-entering their temple. I arrived at 8 a.m. to hear the end of the 48-hour recitation of the 1,430 pages of the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy scriptures. I planned to stay for an hour or two, but did not leave until well into the afternoon.

There was grief. There was peace. People came and went, prayed, chatted, hugged, and cried. The gurdwara (Sikh place of worship) was filled to overflowing. I sat in a chair in the back, behind the area where most Sikhs sat cross-legged on a large white cloth covering the floor. I participated as best as I could, feeling the graciousness and love that seemed to permeate the temple.

At one point Aisha Qidwae introduced herself to me as a Milwaukee Jour-
nal Sentinel reporter. She wondered what brought me to the gurdwara that morning. I explained that I wanted to pay my respects and that, as a 2nd-grade teacher, I wanted to teach my students about the Sikhs and the atrocity of Aug. 5; I knew I needed to learn much more to be able to do so. Aisha had written many of the uncharacteristically substantial articles I’d been reading in our local newspaper. As a Hindi speaker, she was able to interview many of the families in their native tongue.

As I left the temple my eyes met a dime-sized bullet hole in a doorjamb near the main prayer room. A plaque above read, “We Are One. 8-5-12.”

A few days later I attended a drumming circle for peace at the temple. The woman next to me introduced herself as Gurpreet, and we struck up a conversation. I told her I hoped to find someone from the Sikh community who might be willing to visit my classroom. Gurpreet works with the youth group at the temple, and she offered to give me the names of people who could visit.

As I made my usual preparations for the school year, I continued to read about Sikhism and to gather resources. I learned that nonviolence is at the core of Sikhism. I learned that many traditional Sikhs do not cut their hair—of those, boys wear a patka, men and some women wear a turban, and many girls and women cover their head with a scarf. Other Sikhs decide to cut their hair and don't wear a head covering except in the gurdwara, where one's head is always covered. Like any religion or culture, there are core beliefs and a breadth of practices.

Peacemakers

The first day of school came with the usual blend of excitement and chaos. As I left school that day, I thought I must be crazy to start a unit on the Sikhs at the very beginning of the year. There were so many routines to teach, so many supplies to hand out, so much mandated curriculum to begin. But I remembered the faces of the people in the Sikh community, and I knew I needed to do this.

The next morning, we gathered together in a circle on our classroom rug, our community meeting place. I asked the students to think about what a peaceful classroom would look and sound like. Many children enthusiastically raised their hands. I made a T-chart, labeling one side Examples of a Peaceful Classroom. I began writing down the students' responses: “We listen to each other.” “No pretend fighting or real fighting!” “Only one person talks at a time.” “We keep our hands to ourselves.” “We work hard at everything we do.”

On the other side of the T-chart I wrote Examples That Are Not a Peaceful Classroom and asked for ideas. “Everybody is talking at the same time.” “We
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how they would complete that sentence. Once they had an idea, they were to return to their seats and complete the sentence. After I helped the students correct their spelling, they transferred their idea to a 3x5 index card. The completed index cards were either glued onto the front of their mini person or placed in their mini person’s hand, and then displayed around the perimeter of our classroom. Examples included: “I am a calm person.” “I keep the Earth clean.” “I am a nice friend.” “I play safely with my friends.”

“Did That Really Happen?”

The next day, as we sat in our community meeting place, I asked the students if anyone had heard about something horrible that recently happened at a religious temple.

Jake replied, “I heard on TV that some people got killed in Oak Creek. My mom was really sad about it.”

“I think five or six people got killed,” said Raul.

Maura added, “And the people weren’t doing anything wrong, they were just praying.”

Javonne piped in, “But Ms. Dale, did that really happen?”

I responded: “Yes, what Jake, Raul, and Maura said really did happen.” I then began to share information about the Sikh people: “There are communities of people all around the world who are called Sikhs.” I placed a map of India on the board and pointed to the northern section that borders Pakistan. “Many Sikhs come from a region in India called Punjab.”

I wrote Sikhs on the board and explained: “The word Sikh refers to a group of people. There is a community of Sikh people who have their temple in Oak Creek. One day a man who did not have love in his heart went into the temple and killed six people.”

Javonne cupped his head in his hands, shaking his head back and forth as he said, “No, that shouldn’t have happened—especially in someone’s church. That is really, really wrong.” Students began to raise their hands. “What happened to the people? Did they die?” “Is the killer still around?” “Is that going to happen here?”

I reassured the children that we were safe and that the person who killed the people in the temple is no longer alive. I also shared that sadly, six of the Sikh people who’d been shot in the temple died. I tried to comfort Javonne: “I agree, Javonne, it is very sad that these people died in their temple. I feel like you do, that this was a very, very wrong thing to have happened.” I took down the calendar posted in our classroom and pointed to the date Aug. 5. “This is when this horrible event took place.”

“How many days ago was that?” asked Seanna.

“Let’s count,” I said, “That was 31 days ago.”

I asked if anyone had heard of someone called the Dalai Lama. No one had. "The Dalai Lama is a wise man who believes in working for world peace. He said, ’If you can see yourself in others, whom can you harm?’” I wrote the quote on the board and repeated it. I asked, “Anybody want to try and explain what that means?”

Karla responded, “I think it would mean that if someone is like you, you would not want to hurt them.”

“Wow, Karla, you really explained that well. The Dalai Lama is telling us that if we can learn to understand other people, we will see the ways we are like them as well as respect the ways in which we might be different. And by doing that, we would never want to harm them.”

“That makes sense because you shouldn’t hurt your friends,” Lorenzo said.

“Or even if they’re not your friends,” commented Seanna, “you shouldn’t hurt them.”

“Exactly. So our job during the next few days will be to learn about the Sikh people. And since all of you have thought of wonderful ways in which you can be peacemakers, you will be helping the world be a more peaceful place.”

I showed the students the children’s book I Belong to the Sikh Faith. We did a picture walk-through of the book; I stopped at each page to ask the students what they noticed in the pictures. After reading the book aloud, we reviewed the main principles of the Sikh religion: equality, service and generosity, peace and meditation, and belief in one God. I asked the students to comment on each
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principle: Did they agree or disagree?

"I like that the Sikhs think women and men, and boys and girls, should all be equal."

"I've never meditated but it could be a good idea."

"My religion believes in one God, too."

"Why do you think I asked you to think about if you agreed or disagreed with the beliefs of the Sikh people?" I asked the students. "Take a minute to think before responding." I often use this phrase when I want the students to really think about something, rather than blurting out their first thought.

"I think I figured it out," said Raul, "You wanted us to see if we are like the Sikh people."

"But even if we did not agree with the Sikh people, it would be OK. We shouldn't hurt them if we don't agree," added Maura.

Day four of our unit began with a showing of a 15-minute DVD, The Sikh Next Door. The DVD is narrated by middle and high school students who share their experiences of being a Sikh in the United States. Although the video is geared towards older students, I thought it would be useful for my students to see and hear Sikh children. After viewing the DVD, we sat in a circle and I asked the students what they remembered. They not only remembered a lot of images, they also understood much of the content. They were eager to write and draw about what they had learned. "I think we learned a lot!" said Jake. I could not have agreed more.

The following day I read the students another children's book, The Boy with the Long Hair. This is the true story of a Sikh boy who was bullied because of wearing a patka. As we discussed the book, I introduced the idea of being curious about someone who seems different, rather than judging them for those differences.

"But Ms. Dale, we're all different!" said Silvie.

"So what we all have in common is that we are all different?" I asked.

There were many nods, after which Lorenzo added, "We should make a big sign with those words on it so we could teach other people about this."

"We could write out the words and draw pictures of ourselves on a banner."

"Or Ms. Dale could take our pictures and we could put those on the banner."

"Ms. Dale, can we?"

My perfectly planned lesson was taking a different turn. "Sure, we can make a banner."

I wrote the sentence on the board: What we all have in common is that we are all different. Each student made several of the letters from the sentence and we glued them onto a long piece of butcher paper. I took everyone's photo and we put those on the banner. We hung it in the front hallway of our school, where it remains today.

We Build a Community Connection

I began the sixth day by telling the students that two members of the Sikh community would be visiting our classroom, and that I wanted them to think of questions to ask our visitors.

As they began to brainstorm questions, Karla raised her hand with great urgency. "Ms. Dale, we should make cards for the Sikh community to tell them that we feel really sad about what happened."

"That's a good idea, Karla," said one student.

"How can we make cards if we don't know their names?"

"I think cards could help the people not feel so sad anymore and so that they know we are their friends."

After a lengthy discussion, the students decided to make a book for the Sikh community. Each child would make three pages for the book: a letter, a drawing, and a copy of the photos I'd taken the previous week. Work on the book began, and continued for two days. Here is one of the letters:

Dear friends in the Sikh community,

I feel upset about what happened in your temple. I feel sorry that your friends and family died. We learned all about the Sikh people and the foods you like to eat. We all have something in common. It is that we are all different. I hope I can help make a difference around the world. I hope I can learn more about the Sikh people.

Your friend,
Samantha

Sukhjinder Kaur and her college-age son, Paramveer Singh, visited our classroom the following day. It was a deeply moving experience. The students shared what they'd learned; asked questions; learned how to put on a turban, patka, and sari; listened to the tablas (drums); read a bilingual (English/Punjabi) book with our guests; sang peace songs; and presented the book they had made. The afternoon was summed up by Sukhjinder when she commented, "The students know so much," and by Silvie when she said, "Now I know I for sure have friends in the Sikh community!"

At Karen's suggestion, we added
photos of Sukhjinder and Paramveer to the banner we’d made.

“Be Curious, Instead”

A few days later, I was in the hallway near our banner as students from various classes were leaving school. Gabriel, a 2nd grader from another class, pointed to the photo of Raul in a turban (Sukhjinder had demonstrated on Raul how to put on a turban) and commented, “Look! He looks like a genie!” Javonne was standing near me, so I asked him to explain to Gabriel what Raul was wearing on his head.

“It’s called a turban, Gabriel. People who wear a turban don’t cut their hair because they believe their hair is a gift from God and gives them strength. The turban covers their hair.”

“Oh. Sorry, Javonne. Sorry, Ms. Dale. I didn’t know.”

“That’s OK, Gabriel,” said Javonne, “but if you see someone you think looks different than you, don’t make fun of them. Be curious about them instead.”

The next day, during our community circle time, I told what happened and said how proud I was of Javonne for the way he handled the situation. I was careful not to portray Gabriel as having done something wrong, but rather having made a comment about something he did not understand.

As I was about to move on to our math lesson, Maura commented, “But other people might say the same thing as Gabriel. We should put words by the pictures on our banner.”

She was absolutely right. Without enough forethought, it had not dawned on me that others would not understand the pictures we’d placed on our banner. Inadvertently, I’d left the banner wide open to the perpetuation of stereotypes.

Later that day we added a description of the photos to the banner and put a reminder at the end:

If you see people who are different than you, do not make fun of them! Instead, it would be a better idea to BE CURIOUS! Try to learn something new about them and maybe you will even become friends. This will help our school and communities, Milwaukee and our world, become a lot more peaceful.

It’s so interesting to do a unit for the first time. There is no gauge of normalcy in terms of what might be learned or what the students’ level of interest might be. Although I had carefully planned my lessons, the children kept telling me that they wanted to go into more depth. Despite the fact I’d thought our unit on the Sikhs had ended, the children’s interest kept the momentum going. They decided to raise money for the Sikh community by selling beaded jewelry and baked goods at parent/teacher conferences. Then, not content with our banner being the only way to share information about the Sikhs, they decided they wanted to teach all the students at our school about Sikh culture. Organized into mini-research groups, and with the assistance of myself and our school’s literacy coach, the children read through the resources in our classroom about Sikhs, put the information into their own words, and created posters that would serve as presentation tools for other classes.

On Nov. 19 we took a field trip to the Sikh temple in Oak Creek. We were greeted by Sukhjinder and Gurpreet, who gave us a tour of the gurdwara. We followed Sikh tradition by removing our shoes and wearing a head covering. Women and men from the community took off from work to make us a langar, a traditional community meal.

“This meal is prayer itself,” commented one of the women as she stirred a pot of rice mixed with vegetables. Two men chanted as they made roti, a traditional Indian flatbread.

Two days before our field trip, I’d received an email from Sukhjinder asking if the students would like to eat traditional Indian food or pizza during their visit to the gurdwara. When I asked the students, Seanna summed it up best: “We can eat pizza any day. But it’s not every day that we could eat Indian food made at the Sikh temple.”

And eat they did! The children ate many helpings of the delicious food and several even asked for recipes. The children also chose to eat in traditional style—seated on a carpet with their plate of food placed on the floor in front of them. Following lunch, we presented our monetary gift to family members who had lost a loved one on Aug. 5.

Heritage Day

Two days later, we celebrated Heritage Day in our classroom. Heritage Day is an initiative begun by members of the Sikh community who formed the organization Serve2Unite in an effort to end violence and hate through the appreciation of differences and practice of compassion. Amardeep Kaleka, his wife, and their 2-year-old son joined us in a potluck meal of foods from my students’ heritages. Amardeep lost his father on Aug. 5 and became a spokesperson for the victims’
families. Amidst their own sadness and
grief, Amardeep and his brother Pardeep
took it upon themselves to spread a mes-
sage of peace and compassion locally, na-
tionally, and internationally.

The children immediately bonded
with Amardeep. When it was time to say
goodbye, they encircled him in a huge
hug. Our unit on the Sikhs had come
full circle. We began by learning about a
tragedy and ended by sharing love with
someone whom that tragedy had affected
so deeply.

Aug. 5, 2012, shattered the world
of not only the Sikh community in Oak
Creek, but the world of all of us who
dream and work for justice and peace.
Through participating in the unit on
Sikhs, my 2nd graders learned that they
not only can make a difference, they did
make a difference. They embraced the
“other” with openness and curiosity, and
from that place were able to learn a great
deal. And although we started out to
learn about another group of people, in
the end we built a relationship with them.

I think back to a card Maura wrote
me:

On the weekend I went to the mall
and I saw a person with a patka
on his head. I was being curious
instead of making fun of him. His
dad had on a turban and looked
like Sukhjinder’s son. They were
speaking Punjabi. I can’t wait to
go back to school and learn more
about the Sikh people.

Each school year brings the un-
known, and the unit on the Sikhs was
certainly no exception. I had no idea
how my young students would react to
learning about a tragedy of the magni-
tude of the one at the Sikh temple. Their
curiosity and deep desire to keep learn-
ing more surpassed anything I could
ever have imagined. If anything, the unit
I originally planned would have given
a glimpse into Sikh culture and an un-
derstanding that people who are per-
ceived to be different are often treated
unfairly—which can, sadly, even include
death. But the students’ passion to keep
digging deeper into something about
which they felt such empathy and com-
mittance, changed the course of the first
few months of school. Through learning
about the Sikh community, our class-
room became a community. By devel-
oping curiosity and empathy about an
injustice, the students were able to more
easily understand other injustices that
we explored. The students also learned
that when they believe an injustice to
have taken place, there is always some-
thing they can do to make the world a
better place. I hope this is a lesson that
will remain with them throughout their
lifetimes.