Run, Hide, Fight

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On campus violence, language, and the climate of fear.

Monday was my birthday. I was taking a walk along the river near my house when my phone buzzed. I figured it was a birthday message, but instead it was a security alert from the campus emergency system. “Take cover,” it said. “Shelter in place, wait for additional information.” A few moments later, another message arrived: “Active shooter on campus. Run, hide, fight.” The name of a campus building and an address followed.

I walked back home and turned on the local news. There was no more information on the news than what I had seen on my phone. I texted my family to let them know I was okay. A few minutes later, I heard sirens screaming towards campus. For the next several hours, I paced around my house listening to helicopters overhead and moving between the news channel and my cell phone as messages arrived, some wishing me a happy birthday, others wondering what the hell was going on at Ohio State University (OSU) and asking whether I was safe.

At the AAA Annual Meeting, just a week earlier, I had heard lots of talks about the links between language and feeling, physicality, morality, aesthetics, sensuality. Before leaving for the meeting, I had talked to my students about the role emojis play in contextualizing emotion when gesture, tone, and facial expression are removed from language. Now I was reminded of the panel I saw on the phatic function of...
language as I responded, over and over, “I’m home, I’m safe, thanks for checking in.” I used a crying emoji and then wondered if that would come across as flippant.

It later emerged that there was no active shooter; that the assailant crashed into a crowd of people with his car and then attacked them with a butcher knife. There were twelve wounded, but the only fatality was the assailant himself, who was killed by a police officer who happened to be on the scene. The attack was over in one minute, but it took hours to confirm that there was only one person involved and to clear the area and figure out what was going on. Meanwhile, my colleagues on campus continued to “shelter in place,” some with their students, others alone or in small groups in faculty offices.

Having already held emotional discussions with my students following the elections and then again after racist flyers were posted in my building, I did not have the energy to engage again; on Tuesday and Wednesday, I simply asked my students how they were doing and then taught my class. Although like many professors I loathe grading, I found myself enjoying it, grading minutely, losing myself in my students’ essays in order to pause the worried and tense circling of my thoughts.

_**Run, hide, fight puts me in the present but also takes away my ability to consider, to measure, to weigh.**_

Many of the stories I’ve heard since then have taken the form of testimonials: this is where I was, this is what I was doing when I heard about the attack—the same kind of story that I opened this article with. Others have taken the form of moral outrage; there is an open carry law on the floor of our legislature this week, and both sides claimed this as a meaningful event with a message for or against gun control legislation. Some messages were symbolic: because the attacker was a Somali refugee and a Muslim, many of us worried that the attack would intensify the already negative climate towards Muslims and people of color in our community.

When my colleagues and I see each other in the halls, we give each other hugs and pats on the back and ask, “How are you doing?” It’s not easy to answer that question anymore. To be doing okay seems to ignore the ways in which our immediate surroundings feel strange and unsafe, but also to take refuge in the privilege that still protects us from the uglier expressions of violence that are bubbling up around us. But to say that I’m not fine allows that ugliness to control my life in a way
that I’m not willing to accept.

Feeling, physicality, morality, aesthetics, sensuality. The events of the past month have changed the way that we use and understand language, and the way that language frames our reactions. Everything seems invested with extra significance. “How are you?” is not just a way of saying hello; my emoji keyboard, normally so expressive, seems inadequate for the emotions I’m feeling.

And then I keep returning to that first set of messages: “Run, hide, fight.” Telegraphic and iconic, these words are aimed at my amygdala, at my lizard brain. Twelve people injured, one killed; perhaps a hundred witnessed the attack. Sixty thousand OSU students put on alert, instructed to panic, to go to fight or flight. Hundreds of thousands of people informed via Facebook that their friends or distant relatives may have been involved in the “violent incident” in Columbus. We worry, we can’t help it.

My training tells me to think, observe, listen. It takes time. It is not good for active shooter situations. But I wasn’t then and I am not now in such a situation. Run, hide, fight puts me in the present but also takes away my ability to consider, to measure, to weigh. Other words do that, longer words, inflected words. Our testimonials are ways to explain, to process, to make sense. Our “how-are-yous” are expressions of concern, of connection.

Generating a crisis of fear is easy; it only takes three words, widely broadcast by a credible source and rebroadcast a thousand times over. The very lack of context instills panic: we don’t know what’s happening, but we may be in danger. Dispelling that fear, putting the situation in perspective, reassuring ourselves that we are all right, takes some measure of forgetfulness, and time, and many more words. It requires us to rebuild trust in each other and in the safety of our surroundings. When we are afraid, we are easy to control; quick to react, but slow to reflect.

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