

Emergency prayer

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [October 2, 2013](#) issue



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Like many people, I was riveted by the story of Antoinette Tuff, the woman who saved a school full of elementary schoolchildren and their teachers from harm at the McNair Discovery Learning Academy in Decatur, Georgia.

When a man armed with an AK-47 and 500 rounds of ammunition entered the school, took her hostage and told her he wasn't afraid to die, this middle-aged African-American woman—the school's bookkeeper—spoke to the young white man as if he were a member of her own family. She called him “baby” and told him she loved him. She promised that if he put down his weapons she would stay with him until the police arrived, and that he would not be hurt. Her 911 call recorded the entire conversation; you can listen to it on the Internet.

Tuff was as good as her word. No one was physically harmed that day, not even the gunman. In a summer when the killer of an unarmed African-American teenager claimed that his fear justified his actions and was found not guilty, Tuff's ability to reach across the boundaries of race and fear—to risk herself not only on behalf of the children in her care but also on behalf of the man pointing the weapon—feels like a miracle.

What allowed her to make the choices she did? What kind of formation kept her so peaceful, collected and compassionate?

“I’ve never been so scared in all the days of my life,” she told the 911 operator when it was all over. Yet fear did not drive her actions.

Antoinette Tuff is obviously a remarkable person with deeply nonviolent instincts and a lightning-quick ability to marshal the whole range of her experience to deal with a situation that sprang up with no warning.

Her training for such a crisis stood her in good stead, and she was able to get a coded message to her colleagues to let them know to lock down the classrooms and get the children out of the building if they could. She drew upon her own experiences of hopelessness, sharing stories of her struggles with the gunman, reminding him how human it is to feel that you have come to the end of your rope.

She was also able to make use of a practice she had learned in church. In interviews she has noted that her pastor had taught her how to “pray on the inside,” how to “anchor” herself in God no matter what was happening around her.

She began praying on the inside for the gunman as she spoke with him, a practice that helped her keep him in view as a struggling human being as clearly as she could see the danger he posed. When the gunman told her that his last name was Hill, she replied, “That’s my name, too. My mama was a Hill.”

She never stopped offering him opportunities to see what he had in common with her and with every other person in the building. “We all go through something in life,” she told him.

If you’ve been following the lectionary through Luke’s Gospel over the past few months, you’ve seen Jesus anchoring himself in God through prayer and teaching his disciples to do the same. In the 11th chapter of Luke the disciples plead with Jesus: “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” They wanted a prayer that would mark them as followers of Jesus, a prayer that would bind them together. In response Jesus taught them a prayer that invoked their shared human needs.

There are so many things that mark our differences from one another: race, gender, sexuality, vocation. But the prayer Jesus taught to his disciples and to us is grounded in the things we all have in common: our need for food, our need for forgiveness, our need for a vision of ourselves as people who forgive.

Tuff prayed the way her pastor had taught her, and she also prayed the way Jesus had taught her, with her attention focused on shared human needs. Although surely her mind was racing, she was able to keep her attention focused on several realities at once: the need to keep the gunman calm, the need to keep the children safe, the need to assure the police gathering outside the school that there was no need to shoot. She knew how to talk to the gunman and pray for him at the same time, and she did, anchoring herself in God in the midst of chaos.

A lot of things went right the day that a man walked into the McNair elementary school with an AK-47. Thank God he did not shoot his way into the building. Thank God he did not head straight for the classrooms.

And thank God the first person he encountered was Antoinette Tuff, who offered this armed stranger her strength and her kindness and prayed without ceasing throughout the ordeal. Anchored in God, she held on to her humanity in the face of genuine danger and offered the gunman—and all of us—a fresh glimpse of our own.