

Talking with our families about school shootings is painful, but necessary

## **Our son told me his strategy for getting to safety. I hate that worst-case scenario planning is his reality.**

By [Martha Spong](#)

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Getty Images

Wednesday dinnertime at the manse is always catch-as-catch-can, given the back-to-back Handbell Choir rehearsals involving the rest of my family. I was not surprised last week to get a text from my wife, who passed our son in the rehearsal room, asking if I would take the starving 14-year-old out “for something fun to eat.”

In the car, we talked about the day, and he noted that there had been another school shooting. I had just been reading about the student who died engaging one of the shooters in Colorado, and earlier in the day his mom and I had talked about the

response being taught in some schools, to “Run Hide Fight.” As we stood waiting for our order in the short-handed Dairy Queen, I thought, as I often do now, how vulnerable we all are.



Over his six-piece chicken strip basket, our son told me the strategy he had developed with his best friend, based on an elaborately imagined scenario taking place in their school cafeteria. These two eighth-graders have chosen the closest exit, the surest path out of the building, their destination to be a neighborhood close by where they could call for help.



He also described the instructions students have been given to follow in a classroom. I thought of a mom on Twitter; her child reported the class was told to divide up, leaving the half closer to the windows more vulnerable. [And what happens to students with disabilities in an active shooter scenario?](#)

This is a kid who just a year ago heard our smoke alarm and stopped, dropped, and rolled, without realizing you only do that if you are on fire. I hate that he has had to grow up so fast and that this kind of worst-case scenario planning is his reality, yet I'll admit I felt relieved that his inclination was to run and get help. And I recognize that even having these thoughts signifies our white privilege.



In a crisis, with fractions of a second to decide what to do, adrenaline fuels our responses. Two young men bravely fought at UNC-Charlotte and at the STEM High School in Colorado. I'm married to a person who runs toward trouble, and despite my limitations of size and power, I have readily inserted myself into situations of physical and emotional violence in the past. I've never been tested by the threat of a weapon, however, and do not know how I would react. I admire [Wendi Winters, who charged the shooter in the Capital Gazette newsroom](#) and saved her coworkers'

lives. The question is not whether sacrifice to save others can be noble; it is. Yet I worry that we are creating a culture of martyrdom that serves not God's purposes but human ones, shifting the narrative to the courage of people who should never have had to use it.

We live in a slow-rolling crisis of gun violence in public places that threatens to numb us with its frequency. If we fear talking about it with our family members, our neighbors, our congregants, and even our colleagues, we allow people with pro-gun agendas to frame the narrative. We must find a way to incapacitate their arguments.

Will we run, will we hide, or will we fight?

*Originally posted at [Spong's blog](#)*