

Our words matter

Lessons from the Tucson massacre

On Jan. 1, 2011, we ushered in a new year with cautious optimism. Positive economic indicators began to emerge. Signs of renewal appeared in the housing market. Metro Milwaukee companies reported hiring plans for 2011.

For some, the change in the political arena was hopeful.

Could we dare to hope that we might join one another in creating an abundant community, recognizing and responding to the needs of all of our citizens?

Eight days into the new year, the unspeakable tragedy in Tucson, Ariz., sent waves of shock across our nation. It shattered our hope. Six people, including a 9-year-old child, were killed, and several people were left injured, including Arizona Congressman Gabrielle Giffords, who was meeting outside a community grocery store with citizens from the community.

While there was initial concerns that this senseless act of violence was politically motivated, we now know that it was committed by one man who suffers from mental illness. But does the fact that one man is responsible for this massacre eliminate our collective responsibility for the level of violence that we tolerate in this country, both in language and in behavior?

There are those who suggest that political, vitriolic rhetoric may have contributed to his rage and violence on Jan. 8.

In a recent client meeting, my colleague, June Kriviskey, suggested that "what we allow, we teach." As leaders, we have a responsibility to reflect on the power of language. We know that language can inspire. We know that language can illuminate. And we know that language can evoke an emotional response. Language is powerful and symbolic.

Language reflects our biases, and it partners with our behavior.

In our families, communities and organizations, when we tolerate violent language, we hold a level of collective responsibility for the actions that result.

Deepak Chopra, an Indian American public speaker and writer, was interviewed after the Arizona tragedy. He said, "The consequence of fear is hostility, rage and anger."

If we were to examine our language when we are succumbing to fear, would we find more aggression, hostility and rage? Would we be more inclined to assign blame rather than assess our own contribution?

We are increasingly exposed to violence through the media, and the more exposure, the more tolerance. It slips into

our unconscious, and we become numb to the experience.

We no longer recognize violence expressed in our language. We don't recognize the power of images and the potential impact it may have on us.

"What we allow, we teach," consciously or unconsciously.

Healing consequences

While there is nothing that will compensate for the horrific events in Arizona, we cannot allow the injury and death of



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so many innocent people who were exercising their right to gather, to evolve into nothing more than one more news story. If we intend to honor those whose lives were taken, we must be willing to examine our collective contribution. No single incident happens in isolation. Chopra tells us, "This is one country, one planet and we share the same breath."

If this tragedy results in a stronger awareness of the potential power of language and a willingness for us to hold ourselves and one another accountable for more humane interactions, we will contribute to our collective healing. We

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will dare to hope. We will dare to hope for a better tomorrow, and we will live into the possibility.

I am encouraged by the words of Clarissa Pinkola-Estes, poet and author:

"Do not lose heart. We were made for these times..."

Yes. For years, we have been learning, practicing, been in training for and just waiting to meet on this exact plain of engagement.

Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of

*stretching out to mend the part of
the world that is within our reach.*

*It is not given to us to know
which acts or by whom*

*Will cause the critical mass to
tip toward an enduring good.*

*What is needed for dramatic
change is an accumulation of acts,
adding, adding to, adding more*

And continuing.

*We know that it does not take
'everyone on earth' to bring justice
and peace*

*But only a small determined
group who will not give up during
the first, the second or the hun-
dredth gale..." ■*

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