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## We didn't go to services

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# We didn't go to services



BRAD SERBER () \* NOVEMBER 1, 2018 \* COMMENTARY

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My wife and I didn't go to services. We went to the planetarium instead. Before the Harry Potter-themed constellation show, a college student dressed as Dumbledore reminded us to turn off our cell phones and informed us where the nearest exits were. Whereas most people in the room probably shut off their cell phones without thinking twice about the exits, I thought about the exits but forgot to turn off my phone. As I have spoken about elsewhere (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fP-be8Zc3B4>), I have a bad habit of locating the exits when entering into rooms, especially dark and crowded ones. I'm not afraid of the dark, but I am afraid of things that go bump, or boom, or *pop, pop, pop*, in the night — or in broad daylight, for that matter. The bad habit of mapping my exits comes from spending the last six years writing and teaching about the rhetoric of school shootings and other acts of targeted violence (<https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles/threat.pdf>). I know it's not healthy, but it's one of the many coping mechanisms that I have developed over the years in order to do the work that I do.

My wife and I didn't go to services. I don't mean to make light of the situation, but we survived our outing at the planetarium. I only momentarily had questioned whether we would, and I knew that my fears were irrational. There's a reason why the book that I have spent the last few years writing is tentatively titled *Agora Phobia*. I shouldn't have to worry about my safety at the planetarium, and for the most part, I don't. Once I knew where the exits were, I was able to relax and enjoy the show. When the lights came back on and it was time to leave, my wife pulled out her phone, and a horrified look took over her face. We learned that several people who did go to services, far away from where we live but in the Commonwealth where we met, were not going to make it home.

My wife and I didn't go to services. Nobody from our synagogue did. We didn't go to services, and that's a big deal for us. My wife is one of three rabbis in the state of North Dakota, and even though she is currently pursuing chaplaincy instead of a pulpit, we enjoy going to services and need community. We often wish we could go to services but don't always have the opportunity to do so. Our small shul in Fargo only has enough congregants and enough demand to have services twice a month, and this was an off-week in more ways than one.

My wife and I didn't go to services. We also barely celebrated Sukkot last year. We almost did not have the chance to celebrate one of our major holidays because the other synagogue we tried last year was afraid to put up a Sukkah in the current political climate. They didn't want to attract attention to themselves by hosting an event outside because the synagogue building has a history of being vandalized ([https://bismarcktribune.com/news/state-and-regional/synagogue-vandalism-investigated/article\\_dd6831a6-b0f0-5c6a-ac16-445933f6e16d.html](https://bismarcktribune.com/news/state-and-regional/synagogue-vandalism-investigated/article_dd6831a6-b0f0-5c6a-ac16-445933f6e16d.html)). So does a local Somali café, which was defaced with Nazi insignia and then firebombed (<http://www.startribune.com/minn-man-charged-in-firebombing-of-somali-restaurant-in-grand-forks/361720931/>) in 2015. We knew when we moved to a place with few Jews that we were more likely to encounter ignorance and anti-Semitism, yet we also knew that living in a big city did not necessarily guarantee our safety.

Just a few weeks after the move and a few weeks before last year's Sukkot, my wife led a 70-person rally (<http://www.grandforksherald.com/news/4314960-local-love-wins-rally-protests-violence-charlottesville>) in our small college town in solidarity with the residents of

Charlottesville after a mob of white nationalist protesters marched through their town wielding torches and shouting ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/neo-nazis-marched-past-their-synagogue-chanting-sieg-heil-two-weeks-later-the-charlottesville-jewish-community-is-still-healing/2017/08/26/d75ef1d0-8a70-11e7-a50f-e0d4e6ec070a\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.ed641d70d233](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/neo-nazis-marched-past-their-synagogue-chanting-sieg-heil-two-weeks-later-the-charlottesville-jewish-community-is-still-healing/2017/08/26/d75ef1d0-8a70-11e7-a50f-e0d4e6ec070a_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.ed641d70d233)), “Blood and Soil” and “Jews will not replace us!” The rally she led in Grand Forks felt particularly necessary after the president equivocated (<https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/15/politics/trump-charlottesville-delay/index.html>) by calling some of those same protesters “very fine people” and blamed “hatred, bigotry, and violence on many sides, on many sides.” In Charlottesville, and later in Pittsburgh, the violence was only on one side, and blaming the victims only magnifies the harm.

Just this past week, I taught undergraduates in my Public Speaking class about reasoning and logical fallacies. Probably the most important fallacy for our current moment is the fallacy of false equivalence, which presumes that two things are equal when they are anything but. When it comes to ideas, false equivalence implies that two people or groups involved in debate have equally legitimate — or equally flawed — arguments. The fallacy lies in the flawed presumption that just because “there are two sides to every story” that both sides are equal in terms of the arguers’ *ethos* and the argument’s validity. False equivalence is why Historian Deborah Lipstadt, who won a famous [case](https://www.hdot.org/judge/) (<https://www.hdot.org/judge/>) against a neo-Nazi who sued her for libel, refuses to debate neo-Nazis and recommends that others do the same. When it comes to people, false equivalence pretends that power exists in a vacuum and that various *isms* and *phobias* do not put members of certain groups at a disproportionately higher risk of violence than others. Not all arguments and arguers are equivalent, and events like the shooting in Pittsburgh illustrate the very real dangers that can result from pretending otherwise.

My undergraduates are not the only ones to learn about the complicated relationship between communication and violence this semester. In September, I led a public dialogue and deliberation series entitled “Target: Nonviolence” on my campus. In conjunction with that series, the graduate students in my Rhetoric and Violence course read philosopher Susan Brison’s book “Aftermath,” which describes her recovery after being raped and left for

dead while on vacation in southern France. One of my favorite concepts from her book is what she calls “prememory.” Brison uses the term “prememory” as a complement to “postmemory,” a term from genocide studies that refers to the epigenetic transfer of trauma from survivors to their children by way of storytelling. As she explains it, “prememory” is the notion that a person, and especially a member of a historically marginalized group, can imagine — and even to a large extent experience — what it feels like to be victimized even before it happens based on other people’s vivid descriptions of their own victimization.

I grew up in a synagogue that installed a fancy and expensive keypad on its door in the early 2000s and had to instruct its members not to open the door for anyone who didn’t have their own code. I remember giving a speech in middle school about anti-Semitism and hate crimes only to have one of my friends ask at the conclusion of my speech, “So, is it true that all Jews are rich?” I remember watching as the people collecting tickets on the High Holidays transformed from synagogue volunteers into armed police officers. I remember watching in horror with my friends from Kansas City when another shooter opened fire at a Jewish Community Center. I’ve suffered from my prememory of the shooting at Tree of Life almost as long as I can remember, and I know I am not alone. It’s the same prememory that haunts all Jewish spaces — a prememory that conjures up the Inquisition, the pogroms, and the ghettos and concentration camps. It’s the same prememory that haunted mosques and Sikh temples before and after Oak Creek. It’s the same prememory that haunted Black churches before and after Charleston. It’s the same prememory that haunts the planetarium, the movie theater, the mall, and the concert. It’s the same prememory that haunts one of my other sacred spaces: the classroom. Prememory takes our holy places and turns them into imagined, and sometimes real, sites of unholy terror.

That prememory is activated when hate speech translates into hate crimes, and both are on the rise (<https://www.newsweek.com/donald-trump-and-rising-california-hate-crime-numbers-he-responsible-1017517>) under the Trump administration. As my fellow rhetorician Jennifer Mercieca put it last week in a discussion ([https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2018/10/25/donald-trump-suspicious-packages-media/1759800002/?fbclid=IwAR3mN7J\\_28K0XpMnu3\\_c6ZPtrosuSY2SILZFzbNy3ldNgPTsFJZE2fDctNs](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2018/10/25/donald-trump-suspicious-packages-media/1759800002/?fbclid=IwAR3mN7J_28K0XpMnu3_c6ZPtrosuSY2SILZFzbNy3ldNgPTsFJZE2fDctNs)) of the pipe

bombs mailed to Trump's critics, "If you have a pervasive culture of weaponized communication, statistically, someone will be violent." Heather Heyer was killed in Charlottesville. Eleven people were killed in Pittsburgh. The possibility of other attacks constitutes a real threat to marginalized groups, especially if those in power continue to treat hate speech with false equivalence or, worse yet, engage in it themselves. Even if no other attacks take place, the continued prememory of possible future violence easily can become debilitating.


That prememory was activated yet again this week. It will be activated again. Six years of writing about targeted violence has taught me that more guns and security measures might make us feel safer, but they do not always guarantee our actual safety and do not make prememory go away. What can help alleviate the horrors of prememory is the trust that others restore through allyship, solidarity, and active resistance to hatred and bigotry. We didn't go to services this week, but we refuse to let the prememory that we carry within us prevent us from going back. After all, agoraphobia is not a healthy solution to prememory either.

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