

A letter to Hailey, from Littleton

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By TOM KERTSCHER
Littleton, Colo.

Dear Hailey:

Something happened to me here, the place where 15 people died in their school. For the first time in 15 years as a newspaperman, I cried.

I was in a church, attending a memorial service for one of the victims, a boy named John who used to live in Wisconsin. I don't think anyone noticed me raising my eyes to hold back the tears, and I left to write my story before they streaked down my face.

But nothing like this had ever happened before, Hailey.

The simple explanation is my assignment. Two boys apparently killed 12 of their classmates and a teacher before killing themselves. I had to interview John's family and friends; and at the church, of course, there were tears by the thousands.

It's true that I've never covered a story where so many people had died in such a way. But I have written many stories about people who died and I did not shed a tear.

There was Johnnie, a young mentally ill man in Oklahoma who died after being left in a jail cell too long without medication; Manuel, a California kid about the age of those killed here, who was shot to death in a dispute over a truck; and Mark, a Silver Lake teenager who simply died playing basketball.

The real reason for what happened to me this time, Hailey, is you.

Eleven months ago today, you were born. Before then, I never had trouble putting up a shield when I covered tragic stories. I don't mean that I felt no emotion; there were flashes of pity and sorrow and pain. But I always managed to shove them to one side and continue reporting.

I have since learned that it's different, my little one, once you have a child. I didn't cry because I was afraid of losing you. I cried because you have made me a more vulnerable and compassionate man.

As long as I'm a reporter, Hailey, I'll have to remain strong when I rush to a crime scene or ask a father to tell me about how his son just died. My job is important,

Hailey, and I want to be focused on gathering the facts. But now I think it's OK, little girl, to lower my shield, at least a little bit, so that those emotions can open my heart. All I'll be doing, Hailey, is letting myself be more human.

I'll be able to gather even more facts, and many other important things, too.

So, tonight, when I pray for all of the people who were hurt here, I'll pray again for you, little one. I'll give thanks that you have made me a better reporter and a better person; I hope, a better father, too.

God bless you, Hailey.

Your Dad

----- Journal Sentinel staff reporter Tom Kertscher traveled to Littleton, Colo., to cover the Columbine High School massacre. He wrote this open letter describing how it affected him.