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Let's commit to nonviolence

By Lakshmy Parameswaran

Eleven years ago today, terrorists flew airplanes through the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, killing and injuring thousands of people, most of whom were working in their offices. Just this summer, gunmen on a shooting spree injured and killed several people in two busy locations — a theater in Aurora, Colo., where residents were enjoying a movie, and a Sikh gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisc., where families had gathered for Sunday worship.

Most of us frequent our sites of employment, recreation and worship on a regular basis, but especially when we need an escape from our own homes. For some, these places can be sanctuaries. This is why the acts of violence committed on these premises seem to me as personal and heartbreaking as the domestic violence that occurs in thousands of American homes. For more than 17 years, I've been working with women and children whose lives are marred by physical and sexual violence in their personal spheres.

Domestic violence has an element of betrayal and irony in that it almost always happens within the four walls of a home, a space where one expects or is used to safety and comfort. Because violence happens in such a sanctuary, the victims of family violence (women mostly) and the witnesses (children mostly) endure much more than injuries. They lose hope, trust, self-esteem and the ability to feel secure. The home that is supposed to shield them from the woes of the world has become a death trap.

Those victimized by the Oak Creek, Aurora and 9/11 tragedies may recognize this irony, for they were also in locations that provided them with joy and comfort, through a scripture book, silver screen or just plain work. Getting sprayed by bullets or attacked by airplanes, I am sure, was the farthest thing from their minds.

The 9/11 massacre was the first time in a long time the people of this country felt the impact of large-scale violence against their fellow citizens. As a nation, we identified ourselves with the victims and vowed never to take our safety for granted. Despite our resolve, our cities and towns have suffered many gruesome attacks committed with sophisticated weapons by killers ranging from college boys to former military men, the latest one in the small town of Oak Creek more than a month ago. A white supremacist started shooting at the Sikh worshippers because he mistook them for Muslims — the religion of the 9/11 terrorists — a sweeping assumption based on physical appearance that has vilified both Sikhs and Muslims for 11 years. No doubt, we are still haunted by 9/11.

Yet we can also recapture the determination we felt in the days following 9/11 by recognizing that no act of violence occurs in isolation; rather, violence runs on a continuum with far-reaching consequences. Abuse in one family continues through the generations; violence inside homes eventually endangers a community. If we monitor the acts of harassment, bullying and abuse our women and children endure every day and voice our objections, we can hope to thwart violence in places where we live, work, play or pray.

The men and women — products of domestic violence — that I see tell me that violence sprouts at home. In the same breath, they also say that violence can be uprooted from our personal lives if only we tell each other repeatedly not to tolerate it from anyone, even from the people we love. I believe this is a fitting and doable proposition to commit to on this 11th anniversary of the fateful day the twin towers came crashing down.

Parameswaran is a licensed counselor specializing in family violence, sexual assault and women's issues. She is a founder and board member of Daya Inc., an organization serving South Asian survivors of domestic violence in Houston.