

Students, faculty, staff, administration, and community members,

Thank you for taking time to mourn the lives of those the world has lost over the past few days with us. The events in Paris, Beirut, Baghdad, and Sinai over the past week have shaken many of us to our core, violating the basic tenets of humanity we so strongly fight for in the field of public health. This senseless and tragic loss of human life goes against everything we, as a school and community, believe in, so the impact of it may be even more shocking for members of this very school and field. We sympathize with the world's losses, we mourn your passing, and we honor your names through our remembrance of your lives.

However, as we consider the roots and origins of these acts of terrorism, and the plights many of our brothers and sisters around the world and in this very country still endure, we must also be cognizant of their implications. If we truly want to value every life equally, believe that they all have equal meaning, and the worth of each person is equal to that of every other, we must act in ways that put these words into action and question the very intuitions that drive today's most pressing reactions.

Students at our campus have remarked about the overwhelming amount of sympathy directed to those victims and citizens in Paris as opposed to those we lost in very similar attacks just hours before in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and other countries around the world. For if we want to value each life equally, then why, for many, does it feel like the perished brown, black, Middle Eastern, African, and Latin lives are not mourned in as strong numbers as those we lost in Paris? Why have many already blamed refugees for the increased rates of violence occurring in Western countries despite the fact that this type of violence is exactly what the refugees themselves are fleeing? Why are some of this nation's own people perpetuating Islamophobia and denouncing an entire religion when it is the acts of a few deranged individuals and not the one-and-a-half billion peaceful members of Islam who are committing these atrocities? Why do some of the United States' top institutions of higher learning feel unsafe for students of color who are merely standing up for the equality they believe in? These situations are all types of oppressive violence, but some use words and others use weapons. Either way, they cause destruction and suffering beyond what should be expected in an average lifespan.

These questions are not easy to consider, nor are they meant to be. This is not a time for politics, but for introspection. We should not be judged nor should we condone others for feeling sorrow at the loss of life in a country and people all too familiar to our own; it is human nature and the sincerest of instincts to feel emotion towards those of whom you are close or whose patterns and society are similar to your own. However, we should continue to challenge the structural conditions which cause some loss of life to seem more important than others while still accepting that this may be the reality for some people – and then do something about it.

The answers may lie in finding comfort and fear in the familiar. It may just be living in a world of double standards. It may be the desire to live in a post-racial, post-religious society when, in fact, none truly seem to exist. It may even be reinforcing the status quo through the ease of similarities.

Regardless, the questions remain and many of us feel little power or ability to act on their very nature. However, even in our time of shock and sadness, it is our obligation as both humans and public health practitioners to do better.

Ta-Nehisi Coates said that “Hate gives identity.” Do not let yourself fall prey to this identity trap, where a scorned heart can lead to an act of impulsive anger. Do not let judgment cloud your conscience of its clarity on what is right and what is not. Do not lose sight of your personal or professional goals of making the world a better place through decreasing human suffering, alleviating poverty, curing and treating diseases, and acting as the truly remarkable human beings that you are.

I'd like to reinforce these notions through the words of our very own Professor Nancy Krieger who said:

“Our mandate is clear. It is to make sure our voices are heard, clearly. It is for each of us to stand up for our beliefs, and to stand together as we work with the public to defend and improve the public health. It is to know where we fit, in this moment of history, and to take history into our hands as we help shape the public health agenda. And, as we carry out our work, we cannot afford to accept a narrow view of professionalism that somehow would have us remain "above the fray." As the history of public health amply demonstrates, it is not a contradiction to be a public health professional and an activist; both are necessary to fulfill our public health goals.”

With our suffering comes a call to action – a call to be better, to do better, to denounce intolerance and stereotypes, to reject and dismember barriers to equal opportunity and access, and to treat each human we encounter with kindness and compassion regardless of their demographics. It is these very differences in skin tone, country of origin, heritage, socioeconomic level, gender expression, and belief system that makes humanity great and should be celebrated. It should not be used to find reason to tear us apart, nor support infrastructures that revel in these disparate traits. The commonalities that underlie all of this is in our humanity, our emotions, and our ability to act. So in our tears and in our hearts, let us find comfort in one another, and in the progress we make every day toward creating a better, more peaceful world. Let us feel sorrow while we also feel sympathy for those we lost in every country. And let us find beauty in the love, remembrances, and active work of so many to overcome this hate.

Thank you.

And now, if you will all light your candles with me, we will spend a moment of silence honoring the lives of those we lost and lifting up their names.