



## Chapter 10

# LIVING WITH LOVE



Love is the bridge between you and everything.

—Rumi

### WHEN TWO HILLS MEET

On August 20, 2013, as the eight hundred students of Ronald E. McNair Discovery Learning Academy, an elementary school near Atlanta, Georgia, settled into their morning classes, a young man named Michael Hill walked into the school's lobby with an AK-47 and five hundred rounds of ammunition. Another mass shooting in an American school was in the making. Thirty minutes later, Michael was in police custody. There were no casualties at the school that day, because Michael had been overpowered and disarmed. Not by a phalanx of security guards, but by Antoinette Tuff, the school's bookkeeper, who had been substituting at the front desk.

Antoinette used no authority, commands, threats, weapons, or force on Michael. At every step of her ordeal, Antoinette offered Michael respect, kinship, kindness, and compassion. She asked for his permission before giving instructions to the 911 emergency operator who was on the phone with her. "You . . . want me to tell them to come on in now?" When he revealed his name, she forged a bond

with him by discovering a coincidental connection. “Guess what, my name is Hill too, my mom was a Hill.” Once Michael had been persuaded by her to drop his plan for a mass shooting, he started to turn his weapon on himself. Having saved the students’ lives and her own life, Antoinette now focused on saving Michael’s. “No, you don’t want that. . . . You’re going to be OK. I thought of the same thing. I thought of committing suicide last year when my husband left me, but look at me now, I am still working and everything is OK.” She reassured him when he was finally ready to allow the police to come in and arrest him. “It’s going to be OK, Sweetheart. I want you to know that I love you, OK . . . and I am proud of you. That’s a good thing you’ve done that you have given up. And don’t worry about it. We all go through something in life, you know. You don’t want that. You’re going to be OK.”

We might suspect that Antoinette was a good actor, hiding her true feelings of fear and hatred. She did in fact later confess, “I was terrified. . . . That was one reason why I said to [the 911 operator] one time, ‘Can I run?’ I was just shaking so bad.” She hid her anxiety, but she did not have to hide her hatred, for there was none. “I saw this 20-year-old man standing in front of me,” she said in an interview. “He was the same age as my kids. I saw a young man crying out for help. At that moment he was not crying silently. He was crying out loud. I didn’t see the bullets on his back or the AK-47. All I could see was this youth in front of me.” On another occasion she reflected, “When he got to telling me that he wasn’t on his medicine and everything that was going on with him and all that, I really began to feel sorry for him,” and “He’s a hurting soul.” And finally, “I had tried to commit suicide myself, so I understood his pain. I pray for him every day.”

When we fall in love, or have a child, or develop a strong kinship with someone, our sense of self expands to include that other person. Their joy becomes our joy, their success our success. But perhaps those near to us were meant to be only the starting point; perhaps nature has, all along, wished for us to keep expanding our heart so that it can hold more and more of the world in its embrace.