Today is exactly one week to the day since the terror and senseless loss that occurred inside the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania Tree of Life synagogue. Eleven worshipers shot, many others injured and a community that will never be the same. It has been a week of heart-wrenching services as all of the victims were laid to rest. It has been a week of local and international leaders powerfully speaking out against, anti-Semitism, hate, and violence in all its forms. We have seen thousands of messages capturing the sense of collective pain and sending love and support to the families of the victims and the entire Pittsburgh community.

So many messages condemning hate and calling for love are delivered alongside an unending negative stream of communication warning of “invaders” and “terrorists” in the guise of poor people, people of color, and immigrants. We are inundated with a stream of communication crafted to rationalize exclusion and manufacture fear. It is shocking to realize that messages of division now dominate our Nation’s discourse. This shock is second only to the realization that our own government, and the President of the United States of America personally, have paved the way down this path. Regardless of specific political affiliation, the discourse of division seems to have taken over both our public and our private spaces. What I am most fearful of is that, as a country, we have too quickly and too blindly come to accept this as the new normal.

As social workers, we believe in inclusion and acceptance. We serve vulnerable individuals and communities and help them to stand up to all forms of injustice. I want to suggest that it is time to serve ourselves. I believe our professional community is not immune to vulnerability. The trap has been set by those who understand fear and how to use it to breed division and hatred among and within groups, families, and communities. It is a complicated line for us as social workers to professionally stand-up and to push back against injustice while also avoiding falling into the trap of ‘us versus them.’

In a previous communication sent to the GSS community, I stated that I am confident that social workers possess the knowledge, values, and skills that are the critical tools for promoting and supporting an inclusive society. I strongly believe this. I also believe that these unprecedented times call upon us as a profession to use all of our skills of reflection to help ourselves, as well as our country, to rise above the rhetoric. We know the danger that accompanies fear and a sense of powerlessness. We also know divisiveness only breeds more fear, and worse, a justification for the rejection of “other.” But as social workers, we also know how to help individuals and communities to navigate crises and to find the way to healing.

Communication is the most powerful social justice tool we have at our disposal. I urge us to use this tool thoughtfully, carefully and with intent. The facts rarely counteracted propaganda, but it can be countered by helping people see the humanity in others rather than the ‘otherness.’ Powerful messages breeding fear, anger, and division can be countered with equally powerful reminders of what connects us.

Social workers are uniquely equipped to lead the discourse that fosters connection. I encourage us all to intentionally bring this sense of hope and healing to our social action. In doing so, I believe we will help our communities and our country remember what we truly stand for.

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Dean