It’s a tough time to be a journalist. Print publications are folding and going all-digital. Layoffs for full-time staff continue as freelance pay rates dwindle. Meantime, a jaded readership faces a dizzying volume of text from news sources, bloggers, aggregators, Facebook pages, and us. People talk about “the media” as if it were some monolithic evil empire while most of us on the ground are just trying to survive in this rapidly changing industry.

And then something happens like the shootings in Newtown, Connecticut and we are reminded of our primary function: To look at a confusing world, understand it as best we can, and then describe what we see.

There have been complaints about the press shoving microphones at traumatized children, and rightly so. At the same time, behind each of those microphone-wielding reporters stands a legion of citizens demanding answers: How did this happen? Why did it happen? Will it happen again?

Sadly, the answer to that last question is certainly yes. My stepdaughter found herself bawling in her office Friday afternoon: Eerily, December 14 was the 20th anniversary of another shooting rampage, at Simon’s Rock College in Massachusetts, an event she experienced as a freshman cowering on the floor of her dorm room. She’s also the mother of a six-year-old and phoned her daughter’s school on Friday to ask about its lockdown
procedure; as a New York State official, she knows how important this can be. “Without a proper lockdown procedure it could have been 200 people instead of 27,” she told me.

There are many angles to every story.

Some have responded to this latest tragedy with calls for increased gun control and greater access to mental health care for those who need it. Many of us, when not wearing our journalist hats, will comment in one way or another in blogs, Facebook pages, editorials, or elsewhere. The political debate about how and why this happened is already in full swing. But as journalists, we must remember that our most important duty is simply to look, understand, and describe what we see.

First and foremost, Friday’s shootings are an American tragedy. ASJA mourns with the families and friends of those who died and sends the loving support and compassion of our nearly 1,400 members. We share their grief and draw inspiration from their grace, courage and commitment to persevere. Newtown is in our hearts. As are all parents everywhere who now feel a bit more uncertain about sending their kids off to school.

— Minda Zetlin, President, ASJA (http://www.asja.org)