

Can we talk about guns?

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July 21, 2012

When I turned 12, my parents bought me a gun so that I could go pheasant hunting with my dad. It was a simple 20-gauge shotgun. The first time I shot it, I thought it was going to blow off my shoulder. I wasn't that great of a marksman. The only time I killed a pheasant was when I was in my 20s.

The gun went with me on several moves. But when my children were at the age when I thought they might be curious about guns, I sold it at a garage sale. I didn't want something tragic to happen to them or anyone else. I've never owned a gun since.

I believed then what I believe now: unless you're in law enforcement or are a hunter, you don't need a gun. And if you own guns, the guns and ammunition should be locked up and secure so they can't fall into the wrong hands.

Now our country has had another [tragic and senseless mass murder](#). At least 12 people were killed by a gunman in Aurora, Colorado, and another 59 were wounded.

The reaction is predictable: a wringing of hands about the problem of guns in our society. Liberals will say that it's proof that we need stronger gun legislation; conservatives will respond that liberals are using the incident to take guns away from law-abiding citizens. And the NRA will flex its muscles and accept more money into its coffers.

We name the NRA as the problem, but its strength comes from those Americans who have an almost [religious devotion to guns and the powerful politicians who curry their favor](#). Even the Democrats, scared silly about losing elections, won't stand up to the gun lobbyists.

I have a friend whose parents own a gun shop. After Obama's election, their business spiked. When there was a rumor that Obama was going to take peoples' guns away, guns and ammunition went flying out the doors of gun dealers. But who in the U.S. has the power or the will to take guns away from citizens?

The ambiguity of the Second Amendment, the fierce and abiding attachment to the right to bear arms, and the powerful forces that back that right is part of the dysfunction of this country. I use the word dysfunction to evoke the concept of family systems theory. The problem with guns in America is a multigenerational (historical) and multilayered problem that will not yield to quick fixes. It has to do with the myths we're taught about the origins of our country, myths that are grounded in redemptive violence. Resorting to lethal force to resolve our problems nationally and individually seems like the default response to conflict.

The Wild West attitude toward guns is neither past nor restricted to the West. (Take Chicago, where there are often a half-dozen shootings each night, with one to three persons killed.) Sadly, I do not see any of this changing in my lifetime. There will be more Columbine, Virginia Tech and Aurora nightmares. The same tapes will get played over and over, and we'll have the sense of déjà vu all over again.

Could we have a civil conversation about our differences on guns and the deleterious effect of guns in our society? Any chance that churches could start that conversation?