

## Talking about guns in the Texas Panhandle

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It's damnable that any reflection on American gun violence is quickly out of date. I was in Texas when the October 1 shooting occurred in Roseburg, Oregon, leaving 10 dead including the gunman. I was revising an article provoked by that shooting when 14 were shot dead December 2 in San Bernardino, California. Now there are two statistics I can't get out of my mind: first, mass shootings (resulting in four or more deaths) occur at a rate of more than one a day in the United States. Second, more American *gun* deaths have occurred since 1970 than American *war* deaths since 1775.

This is insane. What's wrong?

What I heard and saw in the Texas Panhandle in early October is revealing. According to legend, the day before his 1952 suicide by .38-caliber Colt revolver, the newspaper publisher in my Texas hometown ended his popular column with an early Texas saying: *Sam Houston made us free, Sam Colt made us equal*. Equal in power? That's the world I grew up in but didn't know. As a teenager I sometimes drove past a gun shop in a poorer part of town where my dad was part owner. I thought nothing of it. I didn't know that he, a hunter, kept rifles in his closet.

Now, coming from New York City, I visit family and friends back home who keep handguns handy, some of whom find Texas's open-carry law, which went into effect January 1, acceptable. One who isn't sure that's good—a 63-year-old woman of the salt of the earth, the meek who inherit it—says that guns don't kill people, people do. I remind her that on the same day as the Sandy Hook massacre of 20 children and six adults, 22 schoolchildren in China were attacked by knife. All survived. Mental health is the real problem, she thinks. She ends our discussion saying we all have our opinions. For instance:

- She fears that a niece's ex-husband spent \$100,000 on guns.
- Her husband supports comprehensive background checks—but insists on the right to an AK-47 if he wants one.

- Her 22-year-old granddaughter says gun control's a Band-Aid that misidentifies what's really a people problem. And abortion kills more than guns do.

Later there's a Glock by the refrigerator. That afternoon the gun is gone, but a five-year-old boy tells me not to be afraid because his gun isn't real. What does he mean? He has no toy gun in his hand.

Years ago a church elder described growing up in rural Texas and skinning a deer in the high school shower. "Boys is different," he said. Admittedly, it's a big jump from arcane rituals of deer-slaying to gun violence. But I think frontier mentality as American mythology is hidden somewhere in these conversations. Gun control seems as divisive in this country as abortion, which has divided us for decades.

I remember Martin Luther King's words: "We live together as brothers or perish together as fools." The forgiveness offered by victims' families to the alleged killer after the June assassination of nine Bible-study participants at Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina, springs from Jesus' prophetic ethic: Love your neighbor. So too the compassion of Charles Kelly, a friend at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in West Harlem, who died in 2012. Homeless for years, when Charles got an apartment he sheltered street people despite significant risk.

Here's the point. John Dominic Crossan has it right: In any (I'd say even incremental) Great Divine Clean-up of this world, God waits for *us*. (Desmond Tutu adds that without God we can't; without us God won't.) Emanuel and Charles loved their neighbors. What would love of neighbor mean when it comes to gun culture? Stricter regulation? Universal background checks? Banning assault weapons? I'd say so.

It's crucial, however, to have a national conversation across different viewpoints. Despite my Texas friend's deep and faith-based concern for all human beings, our conversation convinced me we don't come from the same starting point. We're in different worlds. When I said guns have no purpose but to maim or kill, she flinched. Despite her son who once considered gun suicide, she'd never thought of it that way.

Crossan believes that Jesus as Son of God and Son of Man means the depths of our humanity reveal the heights of divinity. Does love ultimately prevail? Faith answers yes.

But don't underestimate gun-culture idolatry. On October 1, before news of Roseburg, my friend's husband, a Democrat who voted for President Obama despite fears of gun control, loaded his Glock with wax bullets and asked his five-year-old grandson, "Are you man enough?" *Man enough?* Of course the boy said yes. So the boy was allowed to shoot.

That's how it begins. How to end it? Let's talk.