

Why and how we beat guns into garden tools

RAWtools began with a blacksmith and a friend's donated AK-47.

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By Adam Niklewicz

The United States has the most guns in the world—by far. And it has the most gun deaths in the world—by far. The United States has more gun homicides than all the other industrial countries combined. There are 29.7 gun homicides per million people in the U.S. The next most violent country when it comes to gun homicides is Switzerland, with 7 per million. So we have four times more gun violence than the next country. We have six times more gun homicides than Canada, and 16 times more than Germany.

Those numbers refer to lives lost. There are tens of thousands each year who are victims of gun violence and yet survive. An estimated 73,000 people per year are injured by guns, many of them in life-altering ways. There are over 400,000 crimes involving guns each year. Young people from ages 18 to 20 commit a disproportionate amount of gun violence, accounting for only 5 percent of the population but nearly 20 percent of homicide and manslaughter arrests. Young people not old enough to buy beer or rent a car are able to buy and carry guns.

The United States has about 5 percent of the world's population, but we have almost half of the world's privately held guns (42 percent). There are nearly five times more licensed gun dealers in America than there are McDonald's restaurants. And those are just the *licensed* dealers.

We have as many guns as people—maybe more. Recent data shows that we have around 300 million guns, about one per person. Each year millions of new guns are added to the arsenal—in 2016, a record 27 million guns were sold.

We have a problem: we are addicted to guns. We are addicted to violence.

Nothing is going to change on this issue as long as the country is polarized, with people talking *at* each other rather than *to* each other. I (Mike) started facilitating conversations when I formed RAWtools (RAW is “war” flipped around). One of my friends was a gun owner who began to question why we have assault rifles on our streets. He owned a number of guns, and one of them was an AK-47. After the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary, which claimed the lives of 20 kids and six adults, he donated the AK-47 so that it could be destroyed and repurposed. My dad and I met with a blacksmith and learned how to create garden tools from that AK-47—and RAWtools was born. Five years later my friend donated his handgun.

To turn guns into garden tools, you have to add some heat—a little more than 2,000 degrees of controlled flame. If the steel is too hot, it melts or burns off. If it's too cold, the steel cracks under the hammer. There is a happy medium range of heat where the magic happens—where transformation takes place—and it's a beautiful glowing orange. The steel feels like thick clay when the hammer makes contact, and it cools as you work on the anvil. As the orange glow fades, the steel hardens into its new form.

To turn guns into tools, you have to add heat—more than 2,000 degrees.

But you can't make a tool in just one "heat." You have to repeat the process. You put the gun barrel back into the forge and bring it out to shape it some more. Then again. And again. You repeat that cycle over and over using various tools designed to make the gun barrel into a garden tool. The heat brings transformation. Steel is literally shaping steel.

How much did the prophets Micah and Isaiah know about blacksmithing when they both called their audiences to transform the metal tools of death into the tools of life, to beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks? We don't know if they had spent much time at the forge, but they surely knew heat is required. Fire refines; it burns away impurities.

Our deepest growth often comes as we rise from crisis or trauma or a heated moment in our lives. The prophets knew that with a little holy fire metal can be reshaped—and so can people. They knew weapons that kill can be transformed—and so can people who kill. The prophets of old were not so much fortune-tellers as they were provocateurs of the imagination. They weren't trying to predict the future. They were trying to change the present. They invite us to dream of the world as it could be and not just accept the world as it is. That takes faith.

Both Micah and Isaiah tell of this holy movement where God's people turn from death to life and transform their weapons into garden tools. And the prophets go on to say that, in the end, nation will not rise up against nation; the world will no longer learn to make war (Isa. 2:4). We are offered a vision of a world free from violence and bombs and guns and drones and all the ugly stuff of death.

According to the prophets, though, peace does not begin with kings or presidents or heads of state. They're the ones who keep creating the wars. Peace begins with "the people." It is not politicians who lead the way to peace; it is the people of God who

lead the politicians to peace. Peace begins with the people of God, who refuse to kill and who insist on beating their weapons into farm tools. The prophecy ends with the vision of a world free of violence, but it begins with us.

It is people with prophetic imagination who will become the conscience of our world and lead the politicians and presidents and kings to turn from war and stand on the side of life. We will make violence extinct by refusing to kill. Might it be that we are the people we have been waiting for?

I (Shane) will never forget the night we heard the gunshots outside. Sadly, it's not uncommon to hear gunshots in Kensington, on the north side of Philly where I've lived for 20 years. But these were close, so I ran to the door and found a young man falling to the ground in front of my house. I grabbed his hand, prayed over him, and held him until the ambulance came. The next morning we found out that he did not make it.

His name was Papito. He was 19 years old.

We held a candlelight vigil, as we always do after someone is killed. But that didn't feel like enough. We can tell kids not to shoot each other, but eventually we also start to ask deeper questions like, Where are they getting the guns?

Martin Luther King Jr. was right when he said that we are all called to be the good Samaritan and lift our neighbor out of the ditch but that after you lift so many people out of the ditch you start to realize that we need to transform the whole road to Jericho. We've got to figure out why people keep ending up in the ditch.

When our community asked where the guns are coming from, we didn't have to look far. About two blocks away was a gun shop called the Shooter Shop. It was one of the worst gun shops in the country. Some gun shops are notoriously irresponsible. Over half the guns found at crime scenes are traced to 1 percent of gun dealers. Five percent of gun shops are responsible for 90 percent of guns used in crimes. The Shooter Shop was one of those gun shops.

Where are the guns coming from? Our community did not have to look far.

My friends and I on the block knew we needed to do something. We had held vigils and protests plenty of times before, at the Shooter Shop and at other similar gun shops. But this time we did something different.

When Papito was killed, it was Lent—the season when Christians around the world spend time contemplating the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. So on the Friday before Easter, rather than having a church service in a sanctuary, we took things into the streets. We had our Good Friday service outside the Shooter Shop.

The young men in our neighborhood, many of whom have seen their friends wounded or killed on these streets, carried a large wooden cross to the front of the gun shop. We listened to the familiar passage from the Gospels recounting Jesus' violent murder on the cross on that first Good Friday. We heard the Gospel writers speak of how the women wept at the foot of the cross. And then, after the Gospel reading, we invited the victims of gun violence to share their stories. We listened to mothers, with tears rolling down their faces, share about losing their kids.

Something profound happened that Good Friday. The tears of those women 2,000 years ago met the tears of these women standing among us. Calvary met Kensington. The suffering of Jesus met the suffering of our streets.

After the service, a woman came up to me, deeply stirred. "I get it. I get it!" she said. "I understand something today." I held her as she went on, tears streaming. "God understands my pain, because God knows what it feels like to lose your son."

I realized in that moment that this woman was Papito's mom. And she had encountered the gospel. The good news is that we have a God who understands our pain, who knows what it feels like to lose a son.

This gun crisis is not just an "issue." Its casualties have names, faces, and tears. And this is also a deeply spiritual matter. It is about a God who suffers with those who suffer, who grieves with those who grieve, and who promises that the tomb is empty and death will lose its sting. This is a redemption story.

There is something powerful, transcendent, and mystical about seeing a gun transformed into something else. When you take the hammer and begin beating, you can hear the sharp thump of metal on metal, rattle and echo. You can feel the impact up your arm and through your body. There's something sacramental about the process, like how some Christians believe God is present at the communion table as we eat the bread and drink the wine. There is something holy about seeing an instrument of death transformed into an instrument of life—when swords become plowshares, when guns become garden tools.

With every gun we transform at RAWtools, it feels as if the world becomes a little safer, as if the heaviness of death lingering over us like a cloud lifts a little. We've beaten guns into plows all over the country. We've done it on the altars of churches during worship. We've done it live on stages at convention centers. We've done it in the streets, in garages, in parking lots, and in backyards. We did a cross-country trip and turned 9mm pistols into plows in honor of Trayvon Martin. A tool from those guns was auctioned off for thousands of dollars, which we proudly gave to the Trayvon Martin Foundation.

There is one event, though, that we'll never forget. We teamed up with Terri Roberts, the mother of Charlie Roberts, who was responsible for the Nickel Mines shooting nine years ago. When she picked up a hammer and beat on the barrel of a gun, it wasn't just about the gun. Terri (who died in 2017) was a living witness that God is transforming hearts, not just metal, as she developed a relationship with the Amish families that baffled the mind and healed the soul. Rosanna, a young girl who survived the shooting, is in a wheelchair and eats with a feeding tube. Every other Thursday, Terri visited Rosanna and helped bathe her, read with her, and sang with her. Spending time together helped heal the wounds of the tragedy. Every time Terri visited, she was confronted with the damage her son had caused. But she was also reminded that violence does not have to get the last word. And each year in October, around the time of the shooting, she had tea with the Amish mothers as a way of remembering the season and redeeming it.

As we worked with Terri on transforming the gun, she reminded us that we need God to transform both our hearts and our nation. As we beat on the barrel of that gun, it felt like we were participating in the redemptive work of God in healing hearts and healing streets—beating guns into plows, turning hatred into love.

Read the sidebar article, "[Ten true stories about guns in America.](#)"

This article is adapted from the forthcoming book [Beating Guns: Hope for People Who Are Weary of Violence](#), by Shane Claiborne and Michael Martin; published by Brazos, a division of [Baker Publishing Group](#), © 2019. Used by permission. A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Guns into garden tools."