

“GUNS – From Despair to Hope” by the Eyes to See, Ears to Hear Peace Prayer Mission Group

December 13, 2015



The Third Sunday of Advent

Pat Conover

I was afraid, very afraid.

It was the late 1950's and early 60's. I was 16, 17 ... 21, 22. It was the time of mutually assured destruction when we could kill every Russian more times than they could kill each one of us, tens of thousands of atomic and hydrogen bomb explosions.

My friend and I decided we did not want to die, that we would try to survive. We were thoughtful and planned carefully. Just the right unmarked cave about forty miles west of Tallahassee, a cave in a hill which meant it would never flood. It had two entrances, neither one obvious. It had a room as big as this one [Seeker's Church sanctuary] with a spring in it that would provide fresh clean water. We stocked the cave with food, medical supplies, and a bicycle powered electrical system that provided plenty of light.

We both were excellent boy scouts and we both completed basic training in the Army, and served six months of active duty. We both had pre-packed emergency and travel resources. At the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis we were both married and my wife was pregnant with our first child. Our station wagon was packed, including extra gasoline. We could drive straight through from Chicago to the cave.

I was lightly armed with a sawed off shotgun, a sweet-shooting .22 rifle, and a .45 caliber revolver. My friend was militarily armed, including a Browning automatic rifle. We assumed there would be anarchy and that some others might come of our cave and try to take it away from us. It was unmarked but not unknown to the owner and some local people. Our pre-stocking might well have been discovered. Would we get there in time to claim it? I'll never know. My guns made me less afraid, more ... hopeful.

Patricia Nemore

I HATE guns.

I HATE that little children – well, mostly little boys – turn everything from sticks to pork chop bones into guns for play.

I HATE that gun sales spike enormously after every mass shooting.

I HATE that mass shootings seem to be becoming commonplace in the US and even more that we seem to ignore daily gun violence when it is not a mass shooting.

I HATE that an essential skill taught in the military is the killing of human beings efficiently and reflexively.

I HATE that our police misuse their weapons in the name of fearing for their lives.

I HATE that the wonderful, loving person I married nearly 21 years ago brought guns into my house.

But perhaps what I hate the most is the unsettling recognition that my freedoms, my comforts, my privileges have been and are protected by guns.

Billy Amoss

I began by reading an excerpt of a poem written by my son, Phil, about the time I was held up at gunpoint in front of our house in New Orleans. It happened at night in the driveway, which was right next to the house. Phil was 5 years old at the time. He and his mother and our youngest son, Chris, who was 2 years old, were in the house and did not witness what happened. In the poem Phil made me out as a hero and described how I grabbed the gun from the gunman and hit him over the head with the glass milk bottle I had just purchased on a nighttime errand to the neighborhood

7/11.

After I read the passage from Phil's poem I related what had actually happened. The gunman appeared from the shadows by the house as I was getting out of the car with the milk I had purchased on a nighttime errand for the family. The man was tall, slim and masked. I remember being puzzled by his appearance and not understanding what was happening until he raised his right hand and pointed a gun at me. "Hold it right there," he said. Panic seized me. I took the brown paper bag with the bottle of milk in it and threw it at the masked figure holding the gun. Then I turned and ran for my life. Fortunately, he didn't shoot me.

After this telling of my own recollection of being held up at gunpoint I did a one-minute dance, moving to the energy of these two versions of the story.

Then I re-read the excerpt from Phil's poem, in which I not only did not run from the gunman but overpowered him and took his gun.

I finished by saying, "This is how we create our heroes."

Else Sizemore

So it's 9:00 in the evening, I've just come back from the store and parked in front of my house. I'm unloading different bags of groceries. I notice two young men, teenagers it looks the way they're sauntering coming down, they're wearing hoodies, and they're far distant. I'm feeling ooh, and then I think, no, I'm not going to be one of those people who just automatically assumes that kids in hoodies are a danger. I'm going to do my business and continue.

So I turn back and the next thing I know I'm BAM slammed up against the car I've got something against my head I've got hands all over me yanking I hear a voice he says I've got a gun give us all your bags there's definitely something on the back of my head and it's the oddest thing because of course it's like a step out of time first it's what's happening and then it's I don't believe what's happening and then it's – I thought it would be all fear, but mostly it's I am annoyed and I am perplexed. And I think – I should be afraid. But I'm not going to be stupid enough to do anything that's resistant even though I want to argue back. So they're pulling and yanking and I'm thinking is there really a gun next to my head. But they yank it and I'm trying to help them get it off because with all these plastic bags dangling from my wrists they can't get my purse down off of my shoulder so I'm trying to actually

help them but they don't know that. So there are no more words, even though they are holding me tight to the point that I will have bruises. I just don't feel quite afraid – there is this period of almost not being real. They take the purse, they take the roast chicken, they take the clementine oranges and run. They jump into a car further down the street and they are gone.

And I'm shaken but I'm still not afraid. I think, I'm handling this very well!

And so I was – except then later on came the nightmares, came the conversations, came the realization that I was afraid to walk from the Metro to my house (and I still put my wallet in my pocket instead of my purse when I do). And to this day I still wonder if that was really a gun against my head. But the point is that it doesn't matter if it was really a gun. Because it's the fear that rules us – and our lives.

Ron Kraybill

You know me as a peacemaker. There's something you don't know about me – I like guns.

As far back as I can remember shotguns and light rifles hung on the wall or stood behind the door of the pump house on the family farm in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where I grew up. To hunt pheasant and rabbit in a cornfield on a chill Saturday morning in October as a fourteen year old thrilled me. The deadly power I carried in my hands and brought down a chortling pheasant if I was fast enough, made me feel grownup, part of the world of men.

So in 1993, in a remote training camp in the high veld above Pretoria, on the third day of a course in conflict resolution I was leading for police readying themselves for the new South Africa, when a couple of officers came to me during morning break and asked if I'd like to go out on the firing range, I didn't hesitate to say yes. I wasn't sure exactly what they had in mind, but when I jumped into their minivan after lunch, the huge pile of weapons and ammunition covering the floor left little doubt. Four officers grinned at me like boys in a toy store. My heart was pounding.

We started with rubber bullets. These came in two varieties. One was a heavy chunk of rubber an inch and a half in diameter and over 3 inches long. I had seen these fired at protesters and witnessed a colleague who had taken a direct hit from one, as a peace monitor standing between police and protesters the previous year. She

limped into the office the next day with a massive purple black welt on her leg. It was the size of a large outstretched hand but with a perfectly round white center the size of the rubber bullet.

Then to the steel ball bearings covered with blue rubber, the size of marbles. In their shotgun bullet casing, they looked like the pumpkin ball slugs I remembered from deer hunting in my youth.

On to birdshot in a 12 gauge shotgun. I remembered my first experience with shotguns at the age of 12, when holding the long, heavy weapon level and steady occupied my attention so fully that I neglected to secure it tightly against my shoulder. Its kick hurled it up and over my head to the ground and left me with a bruised ego and a sore shoulder for a day. Now on the firing range two shots were enough of this familiar weapon for me and I was ready to move up to more exotic ones. But the magazine held 10 rounds; the police trainer insisted as a safety protocol, for this and every weapon he handed me that day, that I fire every round. I wondered how I'd feel tomorrow after ten kicks in the shoulder.

Then we graduated to weapons I'd rarely seen and never fired. The Uzi machine gun, I wrote in my journal a few days later, was "wonderfully light, compact, and maneuverable, elegant as a laptop computer." Then R4 and R5 rifles, South African automatic rifles of similar caliber to the American M16. Long belts of ammo for each and no worries about kicks for low-recoil rifle. T-t-t-t-t-t-t-t!

Then ten rounds with a Beretta pistol. I'd had a recurring dream for years about shooting an unknown invader with a pistol. I wondered as I fired at a human shaped target 30 yards away if today's real life experience would feed or extinguish the dream.

I turned out to be a pretty good shot, coming within inches of my target with the pistol and the same with the rifles at 125 yards.

We concluded with a series of smoke grenades, tear gas, stun grenades, and tracer bullets shot by a Light Machine Gun. The latter turned out not to be very light, requiring a strong arm to aim, unless you lie on the ground and use the short bipod. Its range was 800 meters, nearly half a mile. I felt a wonderful sense of power sending a deadly arc high into the mountain range above us.

I loved every minute of that hour on the firing range. As a lifelong tinkerer, I

loved the mechanical elegance of those weapons. I knew that every one was a highly crafted device, the product of years of study and creative thought and beneficiary of endless rounds of improvement.

Even more, I loved the sense of power I felt with deadly machines in my hands. I loved that I could stand here, in one place, aim at something far away, and in an instant obliterate it.

Perhaps most of all, I loved the camaraderie I shared with the police officers. Because those weapons were so powerful and unusual, not something that most people know anything about, I felt part of a great club of all those who fire such them. I felt like an honored man among a highly skilled elite. I was an insider.

The time on the firing range sealed my relationship with the police – they had taken me through a nearly-sacred ritual and I had done well.

It also troubled my conscience. I had spent years teaching skills for nonviolent resolution of conflict and lived in places where weapons had caused indescribable grief. Was I sending entirely the wrong message by going along with these officers, eager as boys to share their toys, in enjoying the thrill of weapons? What did it say about me that I enjoyed it all so much?

Over twenty years later, I am still not sure if I did the “right” thing that day. But I am grateful I had that experience for I now see and understand certain things with greater clarity.

I understand love of guns, for I cannot deny that I too am drawn to powerful weapons of death.

I also came to understand something about why I am drawn to weapons. Shooting was fun, but the big joy was not so much in the firing itself but in things that came to me through it.

For that hour and the rest of that day I felt powerful, capable, connected, and esteemed, intensely so.

The experience convinced me that guns get a grip on the human psyche because they offer a quick high in ways we’d all like to feel good. Yet we don’t have to be

Solomon to recognize that quick thrills don't last. In the end only deep, honest relationships, meaningful involvements, and active spirituality can truly satisfy.

I do not doubt that some of those who use guns possess all three of those in generous measure. But I am convinced that the widespread obsession with guns as a solution to fear reflects misplaced hope. No amount of weaponry will bring rest to those whose lives are empty of things that endure.

A sense of loyalty and tradition caused me to pass along a shotgun from my grandfather to my son some years ago. But I've seen too many lives and family destroyed by guns to keep one in my own house. I never again dreamed about shooting at an unknown invader with a pistol after that day on the firing range. But I'm still intrigued with weapons, enough to remind me I'm still growing in those spaces of heart and soul where weapons offer easy shortcuts to inner peace.

Sandra Miller – a reading of the names of victims of gun violence

John Lennon

Jeremy Mardis

Heather Ciccone

Freddie Gray

Kareem Rashad Sultan Khan

Glen Rawlings

Louis Jack Shepherd

Laquan McDonald

Ronald Johnson

Treyvon Martin

Robert Adams

Larry Daniel Kaufman

Harry Bowman

Sierra Clayborn

Shannon Johnson

Isaac Amanios

Michael Wetzel

Yvette Velasco

Nicholas Thalasinis

Tin Nguyen

Bennetta Betbadal

Juan Espinoza

Damien Meins

Aurora Godoy

Rev. Clementa Pinckney

Cynthia Hurd

Rev. Sharonda Coleman-Singleton

Tywanza Sanders

Ethel Lance

Susie Jackson

Depayne Middleton Doctor

Rev. Daniel Simmons

Myra Thompson

Police Officer Michael Johnson

Police Sgt. Scott Lunger

Police Officer Sean Bolton

Sgt. First Class Pablo A Ruiz

Petty Officer Third Class Ryan D Burris

Lilly Rael-Garcia

Jaydon Chavez

Police Officer Garrett Swasey

Ke'arre Stewart

Jennifer Markovsky

Reading of the names was accompanied by the 5 other members of the Eyes to See, Ears to Hear Peace Prayer Mission Group offering Interplay movement to express their individual reactions. The reading was followed by Sandra singing a Jewish prayer known as a [niggun](#) which the congregation knows; starting is as mournful and heartrending transitioning through a lightening of spirit to hope with people joining in in voice and movement.