

REMARKS: THE NEWTOWN ANNIVERSARY

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At Channing Memorial Unitarian Universalist Church, Newport

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Today, a year after it was shattered by an unspeakable horror, Newtown is hoping for a day of quiet peace.

Since the horror at Newtown one year ago, 29,000 lives have been snuffed out by guns in the United States. Or is it 33,000 — depends on which count you use. But whether it's 29,000 or 33,000 or somewhere in between, what's happening is obscene. The 33,000 number, by the way, comes from *Slate*, which just after Newtown set up a database to track every media mention of gun violence.

In fact, on average, 32 Americans are murdered with guns every day and 140 are treated for a gun assault in an emergency room.¹ An average of eight children and teens under the age of 20 are among those killed by guns every day.² The firearm homicide rate is 20 times higher in the United States than the combined rates of 22 countries that are our peers in wealth and population³.

But that's not all. Every day on average, 51 people commit suicide with a firearm, and 45 people are shot or killed in a gun accident.⁴ A

gun in the home is 22 times more likely to be used to kill or injure in a domestic homicide, suicide, or unintentional shooting than to be used in self-defense.⁵



A year ago, a deeply troubled young man was living in a house where his mother kept weapons of mass killing, including the notorious AR-15. His mother, whose guns they were, was the first shot and killed. And then he went down to the school and fired off 154 bullets into the faces of those 20 children, and six staff. But the carnage has been going on for years.

In 1999 there was Columbine high school. Two Columbine students walked the halls with guns, knives, and a multitude of bombs, and killed. When the day was done, twelve students, one teacher, and the two murderers were dead; plus 21 more were injured.

There were the 33 at Virginia Tech, and then two more shot dead at the same school.

Then just last year — there were more at Chardon High School in Ohio. There were seven more at a religious college in Oakland, CA last year. There was that theatre in Aurora, CO. The killer there had bought his 6,000-round arsenal *online*.

There was the mass shooting at the Sikh temple in Wisconsin last year, too and another at Texas A&M where three more died. There was the incident with the semiautomatic at the Empire State Building and another one at a

1 The Brady Campaign averaged the most recent three years of data from death certificates (2008-2010) and estimates of emergency room admissions (2009-2011) available via CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control's Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System, <http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/index.html>. Data retrieved 12/28/12.

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3 Richardson, Erin G., and David Hemenway, "Homicide, Suicide, and Unintentional Firearm Fatality: Comparing the United States With Other High-Income Countries, 2003," *Journal of Trauma, Injury, Infection, and Critical Care*, published online ahead of print, June 2010

4 The Brady Campaign averaged the most recent three years of data from death certificates (2008-2010) and estimates of

emergency room admissions (2009-2011) available via CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control's Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System, <http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/index.html>. Data retrieved 12/28/12.

5 Kellermann, Arthur L.MD, MPH, et al. "Injuries and Deaths Due to Firearms in the Home." *Journal of Trauma, Injury, Infection, and Critical Care* 45 (1998): 263-67

north Jersey supermarket. Several more died at a sign plant in Minneapolis and just about a year ago several people gunned down at a mall in Oregon. There was yesterday's shooting at a high school in Colorado.

Consider just the last couple of weeks. A three-year-old in Indianapolis pulled his parents' loaded gun off a kitchen counter and shot himself in the head. A 16-year-old girl in Noblesville, Indiana was shot and killed when her friend pointed a gun at her chest and pulled the trigger. He didn't think the gun was loaded. In Arkansas, a grandfather with a gun killed himself and three others including his two grandchildren — one was four-years-old, the other only four months. In Chickamauga, Georgia a 34-year-old man heard a prowler outside and rather than wait for police, he went outside with his .40 caliber handgun and fired four shots at the silhouette of a man behind his house. It turned to be a 72-year-old suffering from Alzheimer's who had wandered away from his house. And there was the 21-year-old San Diego man whose "long-time friend" was showing him a gun. He dropped the weapon, it went off, he was struck in the chest — and his life ended.

Slate has compiled 11,000 gun deaths in the year since Newtown. And because the NRA and its congressional allies have made it very hard for the federal government to collect such data, they estimate the actual number is likely since Newtown is more than 33,000 people.⁶

And yesterday — another shooting in a high school, this one in Colorado, only eight miles from Columbine, where that horror struck in 1999.

BUT NOTHING SHOCKED AND SICKENED US OR BROKE OUR HEARTS the way last December 14's horrors at Newtown did.

In the wake of Newtown, a man whose own son was shot dead at Simon's Rock Col-

6 Michael Cohen, "A year after Newtown, America's gun carnage continues with no end in sight," *The Guardian*, 13 December 2013.

lege in western Massachusetts 20 years ago wrote this in the *Times*:

Gun control, such a live issue in the "early" days of school shootings, inexplicably became a third-rail issue for politicians.

I came to realize that, in essence, this is the way we in America want things to be. We want our freedom, and we want our firearms, and if we have to endure the occasional school shooting, so be it.

It is impossible not react with horror to news of the shootings in Connecticut. Our horror is nuanced by knowledge of what those families are going through, and what they will have to endure in years to come.

More horrible still — to me at least — is the inevitable lament, "How could we have let this happen?"

It is a horrible question because the answer is so simple. Make it easy for people to get guns and things like this will happen.

Children will continue to pay for a freedom their elders enjoy.⁷

And the best mental health system in the world cannot prevent it.



So why — even after these horrors — can't we regulate guns and ammunition as seriously as we regulate cars?

Why is it that children ages 5 to 14 in America are **13 times** as likely to be murdered with guns as children in other industrialized countries? The stairways and windows and schoolbuses and cafeteria food are regulated.

But you can get any kind of mass killing machine you want, and as many as you want, and all the giant magazines of ammunition. You have to register your car but not your gun.

Why? Why is this?

Well — setting aside a few fanatics whos imply want to resist and overthrow the government — and they are vocal; you've heard their rhetoric even in halls of government itself — but setting those aside —

7 Gregory Gibson. "Why America Lets the Killings Continue." *New York Times*, Dec. 14, 2012.

I believe the first reason is terribly simple and cannot make us proud of ourselves. It's breathtaking selfishness.

It's the greed of a giant and growing and very profitable industry. And they know that after every one of these incidents, people get scared and flock to gun stores to buy more guns. Because they can.

The gunmakers love to cite the Second Amendment, the remnant of a time before there was a real national military, a time of muskets, specifically 1791. And they interpret that anachronism of an amendment to mean *it's my perfect right and nobody's going to stop me*. And it's the selfishness that's prepared to do it because they can. I suppose that if this were 1850, the same people would be shouting that they are going to own slaves because the Constitution says they can and anybody who opposes them must hate the Constitution.

No, that Constitution is a very great document and charter of freedom, but it is *our* Constitution, subject to *our* ability to amend it so that no, one human being cannot own another as property, or, if we are willing as a people to do it, to join the civilized world and put real controls on these terrible weapons.

So the question is, Do we want to be a barbaric land of terror? No civilized country has anything like our gun violence. Too many law-abiding citizens — given a moment of rage or despair or a mental crash — and the easy availability of a gun — become criminals, killers, or suicides.

We have gathered to remember and mourn those who have been lost, whether, during this past year alone, it was 29,000 or 33,000. But our gathering would be no more than a maudlin act of sentimentality if we were not prepared to go directly to that question:

Do we want to be a barbaric land of terror? Do we want to be a land where in a moment of time, in a flash, a law-abiding citizen — given a moment of rage or despair, or mental or emotional crash — *and the easy availability of a gun* — become criminals, killers, or suicides. Or do we want to be a civilized home to people who live in safety and freedom from fear and terror?

That's what we've got to decide today. That's what our leaders and lawmakers have got to decide today and we are still looking for the first signs of sanity and courage. In the meantime, we, who have made up our minds, will not, must not, remain silent.