

Shall We Panic Yet?

A sermon offered by Lisa Fleeharty

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When you are in a rush, you are under the gun. Committed fully, you are in, lock, stock, and barrel, and you will stick to your guns, because all your data is neatly set out in bullet points. Your argument is bullet-proof, and you know that your co-worker is a real pistol, who is locked and loaded to make a great presentation—unless she is too trigger happy and gets shot down, in which case, she may become gun shy. Indeed, prior to this service, you may have been given a trigger warning.

That we are swimming in the waters of a gun culture is all around us. It is set forth in our Constitution and permeates our everyday language. Our movies, video games and TV shows are rife with fictionalized gun violence and we see it chronicled factually every day in newspapers, newscasts and online. For some of us, it enters our homes, our neighborhoods, our workplaces, our houses of worship in very personal and very deadly ways.

So, let's unpack this a little. Let's look at where we've been and where we might be going.

Europeans, looking variously for adventure, deportation as an alternative to being hanged, new beginnings, freedom to practice their religion, or wealth, migrated to this new world bringing, among other things, firearms. Largely pistols and muskets, these were used both for protection and to hunt for food, and were of varying degrees of condition and usefulness. In most settlements, such armaments were closely regulated so that the number of usable weapons were known by and available for militias. Settlements morphed into colonies, which eventually looked to band together to form a new nation. Which needed, among other things, a constitution to set out how this new nation would regulate itself.

The Constitution's framers argued back and forth about virtually everything, trying to forge a

document that would work—and get ratified—in the moment, but that would also work in some unknown future where conditions and times might be vastly different. They had just fought a war, and won it, they thought, but who knew if king and parliament might try to reassert itself one day? Moreover, the relationship our nascent nation had with most or all of the native tribes was tenuous at best. European settlers' ideas of land ownership and manifest destiny did not sit well with people who had been living here for thousands of years, and who were understandably incensed by the invasion. And who chose to fight back. Hence, the Second Amendment.

During all this time, towns, cities and colonies or states regulated in some way or another, the legal use, possession, or storage of both long guns and pistols. In the slave-holding South, for example, enslaved persons variously could not own or use firearms, or could, in the instances of fighting off attacks from native tribes. Later, even in the alleged “wild west”, the so-called gunfighting cowboy was in large part an exaggeration by sensationalist authors trying to hawk dime novels on readers back east looking for armchair adventures. In the 1930's, in order to stop crime syndicates, laws were passed forbidding civilian use of automatic weapons. Semi-automatic weapons were regulated in 1994 by the Brady bill, passed by Congress after the assassination attempt on President Reagan.

So fast forward to now. Even though studies show that over the last several years, the number of households that own guns has dropped, there is scarcely a day goes by that one cannot read about or worse, witness an instance of violence involving a gun. Gang activity, retribution shooting, suicides, mass shootings in public places. This includes schools and places of worship, both of which should be held as sanctuary—safe places where we educate our children and celebrate that which we hold sacred.

What have we become? Shortly after the murders at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida, my oldest granddaughter

attended a student protest in her home town in Virginia. The sign she made and chose to carry read “Am I Next?”. Her mom posted it on Facebook, and when I saw it, it took my breath away in horror.

But as much of a wake-up call as that was, it paled in comparison to the testimony of the sister of slain rap artist Edward Montre Seay, better known as Tre Da Kid. When she spoke at a meeting of the Caucus of African American Leaders of Anne Arundel County, on the evening of her brother’s memorial, her voice broke in anguish as she told us, through tears, that she has lost, via gun violence, three close relatives in the past two years.

No. That is unacceptable. As was the death of ten-year-old Makiyah Wilson, caught in a fusillade of bullets from men in a car when she went to buy ice cream on her own street. As are the mass killings at Columbine, Marjorie Stoneman Douglas, Newtown Connecticut—first graders, for God’s sake. As was the death of Tyrique Hudson, a promising young software engineer, gunned down by a man living in the same apartment complex. As are the deaths of young black men caught in webs of gang violence and retribution or just being in the wrong place at the wrong time. As are abused women who are more likely to be killed by their abuser if there is a gun in the house. As are Trans women and men, just for being who they are. As was our own Wendy Winters and four of her fellow journalists. As are police, who daily risk being shot, and because they are, are more likely to suspect that everything is a gun, that everyone is armed, even when they are not, sometimes with lethal consequences. Moreover, none of this, none of it, touches the numbers of people who are wounded in gun violence and live with the results of that in varying degrees of pain and disability, or the tens of thousands of people who commit suicide with a gun, or the hundreds of thousands of families and friends who mourn the loss of those who have died and will miss them forever.

Shall we panic yet? No. Not a chance. Nor do we stand around wringing our hands hoping “they” will fix it, that “someone” will come up with

a “magic bullet” that will solve this for us. What we do matters. We can be the co-conspirators of our own demise, or the agents of our salvation.

We are a people of faith and of ethics, of empathy and of action. Let’s look at how we might work that. There has been a sort of unholy alliance between the National Rifle Association (the NRA) and gun manufacturers that has been trying to convince us that we are in danger of scrapping the Second Amendment and that the government is coming to take our guns away. To this end, they have resisted anything that even looks like regulation, even, until this year, collection of data by the Center for Disease Control and the National Institute of Health. This is errant nonsense. We live in a democracy. We elect the government. We can hold it accountable. We are not likely to lose the Second Amendment, nor should we, but we can certainly act like we have some sense.

In order for me to drive a car in this country, any state that I may live in requires me to show that I know what the rules of the road are, that I am physically able to drive or have a reasonable work-around (in my case eyeglasses) and that I can operate a vehicle safely. If I want to drive another kind of vehicle, say a semi or a motorcycle, I have to learn how to do it and take another driving test. Each vehicle must also be insured. If I fail to operate my vehicle in a safe manner and get traffic tickets or have accidents, I may have to pay more to be insured, and will also run the risk of losing my license, because an unsafe car with an unsafe driver can be a lethal weapon. Moreover, any vehicle that I own also has to be licensed, and those licenses renewed periodically. If I get rid of a vehicle, or if it is stolen, I need to report it. It makes absolutely no sense that we do not use the same process when someone wants to own a gun, as the *only* purpose of a gun is to be a lethal weapon. And yes, there need to be universal background checks. No exceptions. Moreover, as Wendy Winters’ son, Phoenix Geimer, wrote in his editorial in the Capital on July 1st of this year, people who have a history of stalking or violence should be barred from buying a gun, and local police should have some leeway in

issuing or refusing gun licenses instead of a shall-issue rule. We can lobby for this sort of legislation either individually or as part of a group like ACT (Anne Arundel Connecting Together) or the UU Legislative Ministry. And once we have these laws, we can make sure that they are enforced. It is how we put our beliefs into action.

Those of us who have membership in the NRA, which at one time was an organization devoted to hunting and gun safety, can hold it and its leadership accountable by demanding financial transparency from both, and if they are shady or worse, by voting those leaders out of office.

An organization called Do Not Stand Idly By is working with IAF groups like ACT and with local governments to encourage police departments and others who purchase firearms to buy them from manufacturers who develop and incorporate safety features that prevent accidental shootings and unauthorized use of weapons. Recently, ACT hosted a signing event for Mayor Gavin Buckley and County Executive Steuart Pittman to sign onto Do Not Stand Idly By. As more police departments opt to purchase safer guns, manufacturers who incorporate these features are rewarded, and manufacturers who do not are given reason to change.

We often hear the shibboleth “Guns don’t kill people, people kill people” to which I respond, Yes, and they do it with guns....and knives and poison and their bare hands if they want to. But guns are so much more effective at it, and you can do it from a distance, and with a large enough magazine, you can be a really bad shot and still end up with a whole lot of carnage. Which is why there need to be limits on the size of the magazine—the number of bullets that can be fired without reloading—as well as the destructiveness of the bullet itself. None of this will stand in the way of hunters and sport shooters, as both of those activities require more finesse and skill than large magazine rapid fire weapons or cop-killer bullets can provide.

All of this is the big, macro, get out there and work for change way to live our ethics. It is putting our fifth principle, “the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large” into action. It requires much listening and discernment, as well as patience and persistence. *Lots* of patience and persistence.

There is also the much harder inner work that we need to do as well. It is time to take a good hard look at our first principle and how we live it. I will admit that since the fall of 2016 I have struggled with that one more than I ever thought I would. But bottom line, if you are a carbon-based life form on this planet, you have inherent worth and dignity, and deserve to be treated in a way that respects that. It does not, however give you *carte blanche* to do whatever you want, and it certainly does not mean you shouldn’t be held accountable.

What it *does* mean is that forgiveness and integrity and generosity of spirit is what’s going to get us—and our souls—through this. That, and abundant kindness, and listening to other peoples’ truths, while not being afraid of your own vulnerability, because let’s face it, we are all vulnerable. Particularly vulnerable are those of us who struggle with depression and who are simultaneously coping with a devastating life event. Please know that help is available; one does not have to carry that anguish alone.

Because the First principle is inextricably tied to the Seventh principle, the interconnectedness of all existence, we have to consider that the ramifications of gun violence are no exception. All things are connected. So, when African American communities are broken up and relocated in the name of progress, and that same progress does not result in the same economic access that their white peers can have, it creates division. And when an authoritarian, patriarchal, mostly white portion of society feels the pushback from women and minorities who say this inequality cannot stand, and are finally able to make it stick, their fear of loss of power also creates division. The issues that plague our lives—inadequate access to health care, both

mental and physical, opioid and other drug abuse, migration across borders here and elsewhere, climate change, wars and insurrections—are not separate things, even as they divide us. When the core of how we judge ourselves, each other and our entire economy is centered on greed and acquisition, to the detriment of our planet, that creates division. And it is a problem.

There are two kinds of power. Power of and power over. Power *of* is agency. It is having control over your own body, of being able to earn enough to meet your basic needs, and to see your way moving forward. It is tempered by laws and the “power of” agency within others. Power *over* is what defines enslavement and authoritarianism. It also happens when we compensate for having no agency by bullying others, or turning it inward with actions like hoarding or comforting ourselves by reliance on drugs and alcohol. For some, it is a way of pushing away the crushing fear of loss, of “I have no power”, which comes to its ultimate clarity in gun violence. My own sense of this, is that this kind of ultimate violence arises from a place of deep imbalance, of no agency, no personal internal “power of”, no hope, no love, so that therefore, there is no connection, no redeeming moral or ethical compass to stand in the way of the ultimate power grab; that of a trigger of a gun, the bigger, the better.

This is why New Zealand’s prime minister Jacinda Ardern’s idea of a Wellbeing Budget is so spot on. She intends to focus her country’s noncore spending on improving mental health, reducing child poverty, supporting indigenous people, transitioning to a low-emissions economy, and thriving in a digital age. We could do that. We might want to tweak a few things and maybe add some others, but what an empowering way to consider our economic health as a way to ensure that we all can thrive. The earth cannot indefinitely support economies that count their success on continual growth, nor can we tolerate the increasing disparities of wealth among our citizens. We can do better than that, and it is becoming increasingly

obvious that we need to do it sooner rather than later.

So, let’s take a breath. Breathe in. Breathe out. We can do this inner work. We can heal these divides. We know how to do it, but maybe we’ve forgotten. We have agency. Sometimes it is as simple as saying “no” and making it stick. Or hearing someone else’s “no” and believing it. It is empathy. It is kindness. It is getting off social media and sitting down with a real person and talking face to face. It is kindness *anyway*. It is turning off the air conditioning and opening a window or two, or better yet actually going outside. It is voting. It is marching in the streets. It is *dancing* in the streets. It is laughter. It is evening basketball, or Saturday afternoon pick-up soccer, no age restrictions. It is forgiving and sometimes forgiving again. It is holding power accountable, including your own.

When we own both our strength and our vulnerability, we will be more able to reach out to one another in understanding. We will be more able to use our *power of* to do the work we need to do—that of practicing Tikkun Olam, healing the brokenness of the world. Let us live in a place of generosity of spirit, and with gratitude. Let us walk in beauty, and yet not look away from meanness. Let us create a place for beloved community, and draw that circle very, very wide. Let us love.

Blessed be.

Elise Fleeharty

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