

“Security: Reality, Fantasy, or Intention?”

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Security: Reality, Fantasy, or Intention

The first time I fired a gun, I was seven years old, and I was good: I could consistently hit the bull's-eye almost as well as the older children who were teaching me. My father was an informal, country gun dealer, selling and trading firearms across our kitchen table for goods or services – a winter's firewood, a dug well, or cash.

I never knew a time growing up when we didn't have at least two long guns and one or two handguns in the house. I knew where they were and where the bullets were kept. The guns were kept loaded. The notion of storing the gun in one place and the bullets in another was laughable. When someone breaks in – or if a particularly large and glorious deer appeared in the yard – did anyone think they were going to wait while we rummaged around the house, putting the pieces together? Of course not. Guns were kept loaded. They were our security.

I am a product of America's gun culture. I no longer live in it, but I understand how it works and I have an inkling of why.

Merriam Webster defines security as “freedom from danger” and then as “freedom from fear or anxiety.”

We are at once the most secure nation on earth and the most insecure. The United States is the most powerful nation in the international community, but our reported domestic crime rate is the highest. Globally, we have the largest Navy, the third largest Army, more nuclear warheads than anyone except Russia, and yet at home we have a pervasive culture of fear and anxiety.

Vulnerability expert Brene Brown says that we are the single most medicated, overweight and in debt adult cohort in the history of the world. And why is that? Because we seek to cure our internal anxiety and insecurity with external things – food, alcohol, drugs, shopping, and yes, guns.

Fifty years ago, our world seemed a much simpler place. Oh, it was still complex, but it seemed simpler. Computers were something only NASA scientists had, the family car could be fixed with a screwdriver and an adjustable wrench, music on the radio made sense, Father Knew Best, the government was trustworthy, marriage was ‘til death do us part, the races were separated, gender roles were rigid, and even the things we feared or hated were clear: nuclear war and communism.

In the time since 1962, segregation was made illegal, and in some places integration was enforced. No-fault divorce, birth control, the Summer of Love, Roe v. Wade, Stonewall, and later HIV/AIDS changed how Americans viewed and practiced sex. Genders and their roles are no longer rigid and clear, same-sex couples can now get married in nine states, interracial marriage is legal everywhere, Father does not always know best, there are computers everywhere from the space shuttle to the kitchen toaster, Watergate and a series of scandals from Iran-Contra to the sexual antics of Bill Clinton broke our faith in government, and our enemies have dissolved into a confusing array of philosophies and groups from places we can't always find on a map. We no longer fear the slumbering Soviet Bear, and the family bomb shelter has been turned into a storage room in the basement, but people we'd barely heard of blew a hole in the Pentagon and lower Manhattan more than a decade ago and we're still not exactly sure why.

That is a lot of change. Change is confusing and unsettling, even frightening, particularly when it affects our everyday lives.

Historically, we can see patterns of cultural unrest, fear, and the behaviors that accompany them. Any time there are large shifts in cultural understandings of reality, people typically behave in one of three basic ways:

There are the trend-setters, the agents of change, the people who ride the crest of the wave of change into the bright future. They love what's going on, they are energized and affirmed by change and the developments that come with it, and they're happy about it.

There are those who may be resistant or don't understand at first, but who get the idea that times are changing and that there are some improvements that are coming with this new reality and they go along

And there are some who simply reject the change as too much, too far, beyond the pale, offensive to what they know as right and true and real. These folks tend to circle the wagons and dig in, becoming entrenched. They often respond with nostalgia for times gone by, whether real or fabricated, lamenting that things were fine before X, Y, or Z new thing/person/idea/law happened and now the world's going to hell in a hand basket.

Whether we believe the world is a good place or a hostile place largely determines what we see in it. People who are riding that wave of change see the world as full of promise and opportunity. Those who go along see the world as mostly good, if sometimes confusing, and the last group sees the world as a threatening, confusing place where everything is out of control.

When people are afraid, they seek security. People who have been powerless seek things that make them feel powerful. Those who have been hungry may stockpile food. Those who have been impoverished may hoard money. We seek security in a variety of intangible ways as well. We seek surety in our politics and religions, drawing harder and harder lines, becoming polarized. We seek sanctuary from the uncertain world.

This is why America has seen growth in conservative churches during and after times of cultural upheaval. In the 1800s, when Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* and the War Between the States threw everything people knew about life and God and country into a jumble, conservative churches grew, intellectualism was scorned, and people were attracted to religious traditions that drew sharp lines between right and wrong, heaven and hell, God and the Devil. When I'm scared and feeling threatened, I want an advocate and an enforcer, not an ethereal and mystical Spirit of Life. I want Zeus backing me up, or the God of David up against Goliath, ready to meet the giant-sized bully and *take him down*.

Now when people who are in a place in their lives where they feel secure hear about someone shooting up a shopping mall or a movie theater or an elementary school, they often see a pretty simple solution: get rid of the guns. All of them. Nobody needs them anymore, anyways. They have to defend themselves against neither the British dragoons nor the Native Peoples our forebears displaced, and that whole Second Amendment thing is a quaint throwback to a more rugged, even barbaric time. They believe in the systems that serve them well, and they are willing to put their faith in those systems.

For people who are feeling threatened, that's terrifying talk. Security is based in our ability to feel safe and stay safe, and the idea of giving up the tools of safety sounds irrational and irresponsible. They do not believe in any system that they don't personally have a hand in, because the systems have not served them--that is why they feel threatened to begin with. They have learned through hard experience that if you want it done right you have to do it yourself.

No matter which side of the conversation we are on, we're right. Our experience has formed our truth, and whether we are afraid of guns and people with guns, or afraid of not having guns, fear is getting in our way.

What Brown and others teach us is that no matter who you are, you want, among other important things, to be seen and heard and acknowledged. Telling someone that the thing they're afraid of is imaginary only offends them.

Frightened people are easy to motivate and manipulate, even to the point where they will vote against their own best interests – like cuts to programs for affordable health care or to eliminate collective bargaining rights.

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr says in his classic book "Moral Man in Immoral Society," that all communities of people are united by some form of coercion: that the people in power like to stay there and tend to want to put down any efforts to usurp their power. Fear is a tool of coercion.

Look again at the changes that America has been through, through this lens: the people who used to be in charge aren't any more. And we are all a little scared. Letting go of power is

scary. Taking up power is scary. It changes all our identities. And we could use each other's help.

What we have here is a cultural shift, and that's not going to be easy. The journalist H. L. Menken once said "For every complex problem there is a solution that is simple, neat, and wrong."

The truth is that complex problems require complex solutions, and complex solutions require a lot of communication and education and listening. They also require intentionality and a commitment to refrain from judging and blaming.

Complex solutions require, as Dr. King reminds us, not pity but compassion, we must learn about the "other" we must come to know that person who frightens us, that person whom we think holds very different values than we do.

Without a systemic shift toward a culture of security instead of a culture of fear, the battle over guns will not stop. We have to trust each other.

Changing that is going to take a shift, a national conversation, about the hard issues that make us scared.

A lot has been said about guns recently, and much of it has been rancorous and nasty. If we want to affect change, we need to find another way. Shouting will not work. Calling names will not work. Blaming and judging will not work. We've been doing for the last 30 or 40 years that I've been paying attention and so far it has only made things worse.

We need to approach one another gently, as though we like each other.

Because we do.

Can we do it? Can we walk into a discussion with a commitment to be peaceable?

Can we go into a conversation about guns without pre-judging each other? Without holding opinions about priorities, tactics, and motives?

Because if we can't, we're sunk before we begin.

Owning guns makes some people feel secure. Absence of guns makes other people feel secure. If we go into a conversation with the goal of eliminating the one thing that makes somebody feel empowered, secure and "free from fear and anxiety", our conversation is in trouble. Language matters in this conversation. Compassion matters as well.

When we are resistant to a worldview other than our own, we need to look inside for answers, not outside for solutions.

We may not see why something is important, but we can see that it is. We must begin there. The person we are talking to or about is just like us in all the ways that matter. Knowing that – acting on that – may be an act of faith. These conversations are a faith practice among us.

And a mistake doesn't mean a thing about morality. I remember one day when my father was having drinks at home with a friend and they were talking about guns. There were long guns and handguns spread out on the table. Boxes of bullets and clips were scattered among the glasses. I watched my father snap the empty clip into his pistol, point it out the open patio window, squeeze the trigger, and blow a 9 mm hole in the door of his truck. The gun was empty. We'd all seen that. The clip was empty: I saw the spring. The chamber was not. Both men went pale and put down their drinks. Dad's friend decided it was time to leave, and Dad put the bullets and guns away and went upstairs to lie down.

I come from gun culture.

And... For every horrifying story of people being careless with guns, there are a million really dull not-stories of people who toe the line on safety and lock up their guns and ammo separately, have trigger locks, and who use guns only in prescribed, appropriate ways. Lots of people are safe and sane when it comes to guns.

But it's the ones who aren't those things all the time who make the news. And those are the folks where I lived growing up. With help from the media, we create as much distance as we can between "us" and "them." We are scared.

We are scared that we could make mistakes, too. We are scared that we could blow a hole in the door of a truck, or worse. It could be any of us and we know that.

But our fear creates silence, and our silence feeds the distance, until even I get scared to tell my stories here, scared about how I will be received, because even I forget that I am not the only one. You will know these stories as your own, because you have them, too. But I forget. I catch myself assuming that we are a monolith of both liberal faith and politics. We are not.

We are rich and poor, we are veterans and war resisters, we are dry and drunk and many, many, years sober. We are educated by life and each other and academia.

And we all want to feel safe. We all want to love one another. We all want to be happy.

And none of us want to get hurt.

I am not saying that all this can be solved by a group hug and some therapy. I'm not saying that this process is so large that it will take years to fix properly and we shouldn't do anything until we can get to the root of things.

Racism and discrimination did not dissipate in this country right away. People's hearts and minds followed sometimes years after segregation was outlawed. And truthfully, some never did come around. That happens. We need a multi-stage approach, taking action now and committing to a larger conversation.

For now, we can child-proof the house while we dig into the deeper root causes of our cultural fascination with guns. We can draw limits and keep to them, while honoring the fears that rise on either side. Consensus is a nice idea, but not often realistic, particularly at the national level. So we compromise.

We need space to unpack our national culture of fear and anxiety. An assault weapons ban would provide it. People seek security for a reason: they don't feel they have it.

The underlying goal here must not be so much to control or eliminate guns, but to create a world where people feel safe without them.

People who have hope will not riot in the streets. Likewise, people who feel safe will not stockpile weapons.

My father viewed his gun collection as an insurance policy. He was armed should anyone try to break into the house and do him or his family harm. Lots of people knew he had guns, therefore making his home a less appealing target. And he had an investment that could be liquidated. When he died in 2011, that's what happened. My stepmother sold my father's guns to pay for his cremation. His ashes were scattered on the land behind the trailer where they lived.

In the end, my father's guns did just what he expected of them: they gave him a feeling of security in his home, they provided him with the safety bubble of his reputation as a gun owner, and they paid for his funeral.

To my family – to my father – guns provided security. Whether statistics bore it out, whether the truck would testify in that regard, matters not. He felt physical and economic security owning guns.

Perception can be reality, whether we're on the side of the equation that feels the need for security or the side that sees no need at all. Our discussion can begin when we both work toward seeing the humanity of the people on the other side of this discussion. All the voices at this table belong to real, decent people.

Beloved friends, life is dangerous. There is inherent risk in getting out of bed and leaving the house each day. Every day, we breathe air that is polluted, drink water that has been treated. Everything around us has chemicals in it, from our socks to our shampoo to our coffee cups. We drive cars or take public transit, we bump into sharp corners, we trip on uneven surfaces. We encounter people who would do us harm. Life is uncertain. Life is not secure. We are unlikely to fully achieve Webster's definition of security as being "free from fear and anxiety."

What we can do, though, is be intentional about our security. We can move intentionally toward conversation, toward a culture of security where guns are not needed for people to feel safe.

Security is much like happiness – a lot of times it is an inside job. Relying on external factors to provide for our security or our happiness is putting control of our well-being in the hands of others. When we let go of the things that make us happy or make us secure, we often find happiness and security beyond our imagination. Thich Nhat Hanh teaches us about mindfulness and its ability to bring into being that which we seek. When we let go of attachments, when we let go of judgments, when we let go of our agendas, and approach the world with love, we can achieve great things. We can, as we sang this morning “change the world with our love.”

May it be so.