

The Weight of a Gun

by Tawnysha Greene

When I was eight years old, I shot my first semi-automatic weapon, but that wasn't the first time I had ever held a gun. When I was three, I wandered into my grandparents' bedroom where I found a loaded handgun on the bedside table. I picked it up and played with it, alone, until my grandmother found me with it several moments later.

Guns were everywhere when I was a child. Growing up, my father served as a chief warrant officer in the Army and always carried a weapon on exercises and deployments. One of his gun holsters, a leather one that went over the shoulder and had a pocket that hung along the ribcage, was one of my favorite playthings, and when I was young, I would take it from my parents' closet and pull it over my head, pretend that I was him.

While I never went shooting with my father, I would go with my grandfather to empty fields near his house and shoot cans and bottles with his pistol and a .22 rifle. I was a better aim with the rifle, but the pistol was my favorite. I liked the weight of it in my hands, the kick of it against my palm when I pulled the trigger, and the plume of dust that would fly up on the ground where each bullet landed.

The weight of a gun feels different now. The last time I shot a gun was over Thanksgiving weekend. I went with my husband and his father to some property that my father-in-law owns, and we spent the morning shooting at empty coffee cans and Gatorade bottles. We brought our 9mm, a gun my husband owns and keeps in our home, but I found that I no longer shoot a gun the way I had as a child. I pause more between each shot. I miss the targets often. When my husband watched to see why I was missing, why the bullet casings didn't fly to the side, but popped up, the hot brass hitting my face after each round, he saw that I was flinching before each shot, my hands twitching as my eyes closed the split second I pulled the trigger.

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I know what these guns can do now. As I helped my husband and father-in-law clean up our targets for the ride home, I looked at the wreckage--the coffee cans now riddled with holes, the tin splitting and bending back where the bullets had gone through, the Gatorade bottles, now warped and unrecognizable, their tops gone. As I looked at these things, I thought to earlier that morning when we had gone to buy ammunition and had to go from place to place to place, because everyone was sold out. Bullets are one of the first things to go on Black Friday, the clerk at the guns counter in Wal-Mart had told us.

In the aftermath of the school shooting at Newtown, Connecticut, I think back on the ruined targets I collected that morning and can only imagine what kind of damage these bullets would have done to a human being. As I watch the news stories of the devastation of the mass shooting that claimed so many lives, I am reminded that targets are not always things. They are not cans in an empty field. They are not the inanimate targets in my father's Army field exercises. The targets are people. They are our neighbors. They are our friends. They are our family. *They are us.*

Coming from a military family where I had been taught the targets were "bad guys," it was easy to overlook the damage such guns could do. Guns were a necessity and weapons to be proud of when deployed and at home. My father had served in Iraq. My sister's husband is currently deployed in Afghanistan. My cousin is currently serving in Kuwait. On Facebook, sometimes, they post pictures of themselves in a helmet and bulletproof armor, in their hands a fully loaded M4 carbine assault rifle mounted with a grenade launcher. These guns are indicative of their bravery, their loyalty to their country, and their strength as soldiers.

When my father returned home from his deployments, he would turn in his guns and a designated soldier would sign them in at an armory room and lock them away. This room was patrolled by security guards and soldiers regularly took an inventory. Guns had their purpose and they had their place. When I grew up and left for college, I found that that guns had their place in the civilian world

as well, but in a more personal sense--for the protection of our lives and the people we love.

I understood why we needed one. One of the windows in the house we own is loose in its frame from where an intruder had broken through before we moved in. Earlier this year, all of the cars on our street were broken into, various things stolen and the culprits still on the loose. When my husband bought his gun, he underwent the waiting period and background check, filled out the paperwork, and paid the necessary fees. He obeyed the requirements, and we have always kept the gun locked away, unloaded, the ammunition and gun in separate locations.

However, while I have found there are responsible gun owners who follow the rules in the civilian world, these regulations are not working as evidenced by the tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut and every mass shooting that came before it. Regulations for the sale and use of guns need to be more uniform across the states, more thorough background checks performed, and gun owners themselves need to be more conscientious about how they use and store their guns once they have passed these regulations.

Furthermore, we need to distinguish exactly what is necessary when preserving the second amendment. When early citizens of the United States passed the right to bear arms, the weapons of the time were a musket or a pistol that fired a single shot at a time and took up to a minute to load again. Today, we have automatic assault rifles that unload an entire magazine full of bullets in the span of mere seconds. While regulated, these guns are legal to own and operate in the United States, however, are these guns necessary to protect our homes and our families? No, they are not.

We need to understand that with the right to bear arms comes the necessity of honesty about what exactly that right entails. As civilians, we need to realize the distinction between weapons for protection and weapons for mass slaughter. Guns were not misused in cases like the shooting at Newtown, Connecticut--they were being used exactly as they were designed and intended--and while there

are conscientious gun owners who abide by gun laws and operate their weapons safely, there are so many more gun owners who do not. As a result, we need to take a hard look at our priorities as a nation. What do we value more--our gun rights or the lives of those we love?

We need to address gun control and more importantly, address the people behind these guns. Too often, attackers have exhibited warning signs before mass shootings such as the one in Newtown, Connecticut, including strange or violent behavior, and too often, we choose to ignore these signs. While many counseling centers are readily available, the social stigma of battling a mental illness or seeking counseling is an unfortunate barrier that prevents so many from getting the help they need. We need to reach out to our neighbors. We need to be there for our friends and family and offer them assistance. We need to know when we, ourselves, need help.

There is a free counseling center at the college campus where I teach. They take walk-in appointments. The counselors call and check in on those who have sought counseling. I discovered these things when I referred some of my own students there. It is easy to ignore the warning signs, because the topic may be personal or uncomfortable and we feel it is none of our business, but it *is* our business. It is our business to notice when someone is struggling, to listen when they say they need help.

While mass shootings like this one spur outpourings of sorrow and moments in which we cherish our family and our children more, we cannot wait for another tragedy to prompt us into hugging our children tighter and telling them more often that we love them. We need to do this every day. We need to reach out to those around us and listen. We need to take notice when something is wrong. We need to understand the weight of lending an ear and the weight of embracing those who need it, and hope that one day, that weight will outweigh the need to take up a gun and kill.

