

ROTARY DISTRICT 5440 PEACEBUILDER
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GUNS AND ALTERNATIVES

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and
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In this seventh newsletter of the Rotary District Peacebuilders, we want to continue our invitation for contributors and ideas, suggestions and possibilities for our efforts to promote the foundational skills for promoting peace, i.e., nonviolent conflict resolution, improved communication and cooperation, successful negotiation and mediation as well as the critical and creative thinking that can help communities move through obstacles and difficulties.

These are the same skills and ideas we are nurturing with our Rotary Global Grants in Burundi, East Africa at the University of Ngozi. By sharing more of this project in what follows, we hope to spark new thinking about what can be done locally, on college campuses, elementary and secondary schools, in churches, other organizations as well as in communities of all sized, formally and informally—wherever people are looking for new and constructive ways through conflicts.

William M. Timpson

NOTE: Bill Timpson has been on the faculty at Colorado State University in its School of Education for many years and a member of the Fort Collins Rotary Club where his focus on sustainable peacebuilding in Burundi, East Africa, has been supported by two Global Grants.

ASSAULT WEAPONS AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Facing angry mobs as they hurled threats, rocks and bottles, Mairead Maguire and her fellow peace activists chose umbrellas for defense amidst the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland in the 1970’s and helped spark a revolution in thinking about guns, security, fear, peace and prosperity.

Mired in polarized positions following British colonization and the wounds of three hundred plus years of fighting between independent minded Catholics and Protestant loyalists to the United Kingdom, people needed new thinking.

They did not choose to be “soft targets” as the advocates for arming school staff argue. Instead they chose to become peaceful warriors in the face of fear mongers who insisted on guns and bombs as the ways to fight for a better life.

Eventually the Good Friday Peace Accord was signed in 1998. For her courage and leadership, Maguire was a co-recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1977. Visiting with Maguire in 2002 as I worked on my book, *Teaching and Learning Peace*, I remember her insisting that arming themselves would have only deepened the fear, the bloodshed and the wounds.

In the light of the Florida school shootings we must remember how the decommissioning of weapons in Northern Ireland has been critical for reducing the violence there. It is also important to know that funding from American supporters of the IRA was also shifted from weapons to economic development.

So I have to ask how we unplug the weapons profiteers, their proxy politicians and allies from wrong-headed answers to mass shootings and violence in the U.S.?

My recent visit to the Rotary Peace Center at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia reinforced the case for the leadership we so desperately need. Bringing in ten remarkable young people annually for a two-year fully funded master's degree in peace and conflict studies is Rotary's response to the violence in the world where governments put enormous investments into military academies and preparedness but so little into the study of peacebuilding.

Lindsey Pointer

NOTE: Lindsey Pointer has been working on the use of restorative principles in the criminal justice system. She defines herself as a restorative practices facilitator, trainer and researcher and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Restorative Justice at Victoria University in New Zealand with support from a Rotary Global Grant Scholarship and the Fulbright Program from the U.S. State Department.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AND GUN CONTROL

The conversation about gun control in the United States is notably polarized; with each tragic incident of violence seeming to further fuel and entrench the opposing views. In this adversarial context, it is a hard push for the policy change that is direly needed.

So what can restorative practices offer to this important issue? What restorative justice and other restorative practices offer is a space where each person's voice and experience is heard and respected, where impacts, fears and values can be expressed, and where unexpected points of connection can emerge.

Before moving to New Zealand, I facilitated a restorative justice process following an accidental discharge of a weapon that illustrated how this space of respectful communication can help to move the dialogue forward.

Case Overview

Restorative Justice Conference Participants

- Offender –Les (36)

- Victims- Sheryl and Tom (A married couple in their late 60s)
- 2 Facilitators
- 2 Community Members
- Police Officer

Criminal Charges Pending: Reckless Endangerment

Factual Synopsis: A thirty-six year old man (Les) accidentally discharged his gun in his house. The bullet went through his window and into the bedroom of his next-door neighbor, missing his neighbor (Sheryl) by a few feet and causing damage to the house and a family heirloom.

Narrative

The week before Christmas, Les was putting his guns away so that they would be safely out of reach when family came into town for the holiday. He stored away his rifles and then began the routine he uses to familiarize himself with his handgun. Les made a mistake in the sequence and the gun fired. The bullet traveled out Les' window and into his neighbor's bedroom, whizzing through the air on the opposite side of the bed from where Sheryl was standing. Ending its trajectory, it lodged itself in an antique mirror, a family heirloom.

Les ran next door panicked, apologizing to Tom and Sheryl, so relieved to see they were ok. Sheryl and Tom were still in shock. What followed was a whirlwind of reporters arriving and police officers responding to a gun shot report, handcuffing Les and taking him to the Police Station.

The police department wasn't sure what to do with the case. They didn't want to send Les (who had no prior charges on his record) to jail for a mistake, but also wanted to communicate the gravity of offense and ensure that the harms were repaired to the greatest extent possible. One of the Commanders suggested that the case be referred to Restorative Justice.

The restorative justice conference was an emotional one as both parties grasped the proximity to complete tragedy. Les, Sheryl and Tom all had the chance to share how they were impacted and to be heard by each other.

Sitting in the circle, what struck me was the contrast between how the traditional court system and Restorative Justice treat relationships after a wrong doing. The court system often drives a further wedge between victim and offender. The offender may deny responsibility or make excuses and the parties are often not allowed to speak without legal counsel. It is framed as an oppositional relationship. I see this same oppositional relationship at work in the conversation around gun regulations more widely, with each side often unwilling to listen to or engage with the other.

Restorative Justice provides the opposite experience. The process encourages open dialogue, prioritizes repairing relationships, and relies on consensus in order to determine outcomes.

At the end of the conference, Sheryl, Tom and Les agreed that Les would pay for the necessary repairs, complete a gun safety course and write a piece about what he learned from the experience for the local newspaper. The newspaper piece was directed at fellow gun owners. In that piece Les said, "I learned a lot through this experience, but the one lesson I would pass on is: don't get too comfortable. Always remember how dangerous a gun can be." He also commented on the fact that rules are put into place in order to prevent terrible accidents and incidents from happening.

Through focusing on the impacts of what happened and what was required to make things right, the individuals involved in this case were able to arrive at a common sense plan to promote greater gun safety and regulation both for Les and more widely in the community. This outcome makes me wonder if a similar outcome could be reached in the wider discussion about gun regulations if the opposing sides were given a space to come together to talk about impacts, needs and ideas for how to make things right. Often, in the modes in which we communicate (very often online, looking at a computer screen), it is easy to lose track of the human on the other side of the issue. That is perhaps the greatest contribution restorative practices could have to the discussion: providing a space and structure for humanizing communication.

Robert N. Meroney

NOTE: Bob Meroney is an Emeritus Professor of Fluid Mechanics and Wind Engineering with a long career at Colorado State University. He has been an active member of the Fort Collins Rotary Club and regularly researches a range of topics on modern life, issues and politics that serve to spark deeper conversations among friends and colleagues.

MUSINGS ABOUT GUNS AND WEAPONS

The presence of peace is affected by guns and weapons at both the personal and international levels. Proposals for personal gun control and international treaties of disarmament are both contentious. There can be no debate, however, that the widespread presence of guns in the civilian community and the existence of huge national repositories of weapons have led to lives lost and national disputes, augmented terrorism, and the absence of peace. Yet many gun owners and defense hawks argue strongly that gun ownership provide personal protection and national security. It is often claimed that the United States of America is a "peace-loving" nation. Is this true? Or is there evidence that we all need to rebalance our preconceptions about actual personal risk and American international involvement?

So, what are the actual dynamics of risk and danger personally and as a nation? Let's consider several popular Myths.

Firearms Myth Number 1: *Guns don't kill people...people kill people.*

People with more guns tend to kill more people—with Guns. US states with the highest gun ownership have a murder rate 114% higher than the lowest.¹ The US has the most guns per 100 people of any country.² Among developed countries the U.S. has 3.2 firearm deaths per 100,000 people compared to 0.8 or less for other countries...i.e. 4.0 times higher than the next highest, Switzerland. Switzerland which has the highest gun ownership in Europe also has the highest gun deaths in Europe. (Many of the Swiss guns at homes are government property provided for their equivalent to the National Guard.)

Firearms Myth Number 2: *An armed society is a polite society.*

Drivers who carry guns are 44% more likely than unarmed drivers to make obscene gestures and 77% more likely to road rage.³ Stand Your Ground laws have led to 7 to 10% increase in homicides. Indeed, data shows that many supposed self-defense firearms use were themselves criminal acts with evidence that the self-defense claimants initiated the reported confrontations.⁴

Firearms Myth Number 3: *Keeping a gun at home makes you safer.*

For every time a gun used in self-defense in the home, there are 7 assaults or homicides, 11 attempted or completed suicides, and 4 unintentional accidents from guns in the home.⁵ A gun in the home is far more likely to kill a family member than any intruder.

Firearms Myth Number 4: *Guns make women safer.*

In 2010 nearly 6 times more women were shot by husbands, boyfriends, and ex-partners than by strangers.⁶

Firearms Myth Number 5: *Good guys with guns can stop rampaging bad guys.*

As of 2012 in 30 years the number of mass shootings stopped by armed civilians is zero.⁷

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/01/the-geography-of-gun-deaths/69354/>
<https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/firearms-death-rate-per-100000/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>

² <https://www.cnn.com/2017/10/03/americas/us-gun-statistics/index.html>

³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16434012>

⁴ <https://sites.google.com/site/hoekstramarkamu/>

⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/m/pubmed/9715182/>

⁶ <http://www.vpc.org/studies/wmmw2012.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/12/armed-civilians-do-not-stop-mass-shootings/>

Firearms Myth Number 6: “Vicious, violent video games” deserve more blame than guns.⁸

Yet in Japan the per capita spending on video games is \$55 versus US spending on video games of \$44, but the population adjusted gun homicides in Japan were 400 times smaller than in the U.S. during 2008.

Firearm statistics maintained by multiple US government agencies, newspapers, and independent researchers uniformly confirm the above and contradict additional myths about guns providing personal protection. The Harvard Injury Control Research Center data archives consistently shows where there are more guns there are more homicides.⁹

So what evidence exists that a militarized world is a safer world?

Weapon Myth Number 1: *The United States has been a “peace loving” nation.*

Historical data contradicts this belief. Since the American Revolution in 1775 the U.S. government military units have participated in domestic and extraterritorial deployments almost every year until today.¹⁰ This includes battles with American Indians, range wars, feuds, labor management disputes, slave revolts, wars for territorial acquisition (Mexico, Cuba, Philippines, China), and religious suppression (Mormon war of 1838, Utah War of 1857-58). Only a few conflicts could actually be termed “just”.

General Smedley Butler (1881-1940) was a US Marine Corps Major General, the most highly decorated Marine in US history at the time of his death. He published a book titled “*To Hell With War: War is a Racket*” which argued most wars were promoted by American capitalists as a profit making enterprise. His book has been heavily quoted by Lowell Thomas, Ralph Nadar and President Eisenhower.¹¹

Weapons Myth Number 2: *We require a large armed force to defend the U.S.A. from external aggression, and it should be increased.*

In 2016 the USA spent \$611.2 billion or 3.3% of GDP or 36.3% of world total on military expenditure. This exceeded the sum of the next eight highest nation’s military expenditures.¹² As a result of the nuclear standoff of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), there has been no credible threat to the USA, and no direct conflict between

⁸ Statement by NRA executive vice president Wayne Lapiere after Newton massacre.

<https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/12/national-rifle-association-has-video-game-too/>

⁹ <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/hicrc/firearms-research/guns-and-death/>
<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2013/01/pro-gun-myths-fact-check>

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_wars_involving_the_United_States
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_United_States_military_operations

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8y06NSBBRtY>

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_military_expenditures

major states, though lesser military conflicts have occurred. Some call this period the “Long Peace”.¹³

Weapons Myth Number 3: *It is not possible for a nation to maintain long term existence without a significant military force.*

There are 21 countries with no official military forces and 6 countries with no standing army but limited military.¹⁴ Costa Rica’s constitution for example forbids a standing military, and the nation is currently the headquarters for the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the United Nations’ University for Peace.

Weapons Myth Number 4: *A war economy or production of weapons is not to the advantage of the USA; hence, we have done everything we can to encourage mutual disarmament.*

Cynically, one could argue that it is not to the USA economic best interest to discourage war since about 1% of the annual GDP and 10% of our international trade balance depends upon our sales of military weapons. Six of the most powerful weapons companies in the world are located in the U.S.¹⁵ The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute has observed that “*The arms industry is one of the most profitable and powerful industries in the world.*” In a November 2015 speech in the Vatican the Pope said “*This is why some people don’t want peace: they make more money from war, although wars make money but lose lives, health, education. The devil enters through our wallets.*”¹⁶

Weapons Myth Number 5: *The USA cannot maintain its global dominance as a Great Power without the continued maintenance of a large military arsenal and budget.*

An exhaustive study by Paul Michael Kennedy, British historian, called *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, contends that great nations persistence correlates strongly with available resources and economic durability, but military overstretch has historically led to their decline.¹⁷ This occurs when their ambitions and security requirements are greater than their resource base can provide for. Kennedy observes that the US has the typical problem of a great power, which include balancing guns and butter and investments for economic growth. The US growing military commitment to every continent and the growing cost of military hardware severely limit available options. Rising military expenditures and reductions in investments of economic growth are

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Long_Peace

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_without_armed_forces

¹⁵ <http://news.bitofnews.com/the-9-most-powerful-weapons-manufacturers-in-the-world/>

¹⁶ https://www.agi.it/archivio/storico/stop_the_arms_industry_and_profits_from_war_says_pope-261150/news/2015-05-11/

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rise_and_Fall_of_the_Great_Powers

predicted to lead to a downward spiral of slower growth, heavier taxes, deepening domestic splits, and weakening capacity.

Additional myths could be examined, but they lead to similar conclusions: the bottom line is a deeper, stronger commitment to peace and peacebuilding will serve America's economic interests as well as lessen the threats of unnecessary foreign entanglements.

Will Rogers, the American humorist and commentator of the early 20th century said:

When the Judgment Day comes civilization will have an alibi, "I never took a human life, I only sold the fellow the gun to take it with."

Daily Telegraph #926, July 1929.