Building a Nonviolent Culture After Newtown

By Ken Butigan
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The December 14 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Conn. that left 28 people dead — including 20 children — has sent shock waves through our society. It penetrated the elaborate defenses that we as individuals and as a culture have erected to live with the internal contradictions of the bargain we have made to both oppose and embrace violence. Occasionally reality exposes and trumps the cognitive dissonance of this uneasy but deeply embedded arrangement.

This is what happened to me Friday when I heard the news about this massacre. As someone who spends a lot of his life grappling with violence of all kinds, I find myself increasingly inured to its horror. When the news breaks, I’m usually concerned and even upset, but my mind typically goes into analytic overdrive, instantly dredging up models and frameworks to unpack and explain it and, perhaps, to think through possible solutions. This time there was none of that.

I burst into tears even as the announcer pronounced the words “20 children.” Twenty children? I think of the twenty children that troop into my three-year-old daughter’s school when I drop her off in the morning. Bundled up for winter, wearing little backpacks containing their lunch bags and notes for the teacher, they are eager and energetic but also vulnerable and small. Here there’s a different bargain: You will protect and nurture me. We adults try to add obligations on the child’s side — you will be respectful and on your best behavior, you will listen, you will go along, you will make us proud, you will fulfill the dreams that we never got to — but that’s just wishful thinking on our part. This contract, in fact, is one-sided. Because they are vulnerable and small and (no matter what they happen to do to tick us off) innocent, all the obligations are on our side. Our job is to keep them safe and to give them half a chance to flourish.

The image of a man moving from classroom to classroom and methodically gunning down children at point-blank range brings this obligation to protect and nurture into its starkest relief. Is it possible to meet our side of the bargain (as parents and as a society) when our culture is designed in such a way that such violence is not only possible but appallingly likely?

Sandy Hook is not an exception. This year alone twelve other mass shootings took place in the U.S., and many individual homicides have taken place that garner little attention, including the epidemic of youth violence in Chicago where, for example, two young people were recently...
gunned down on the steps of a local church as they attended a funeral for a victim of gang violence. Rather than being an exception, Sandy Hook is an example of the violence that is our culture’s through-line. It may thus be what Paolo Friere called a codification: a picture of the real life situation we face. Sandy Hook reveals in a new and ghastly way the violence that is permitted by our culture. It is a codification that transcends news reports or the typical political arguments for and against gun control that erupt (and then typically fade away) when this kind of event takes place.

In his book Dispatches, Michael Herr reflected on a codification of the Vietnam War: “Conventional journalism could no more reveal this war than conventional firepower could win it; all it could do was take the most profound event of the American decade and turn it into a communications pudding… In back of every column of print you read about Vietnam there was a dripping, laughing death-face; it hid there in the newspapers and magazines and held to your television screens for hours after the set was turned off for the night, an after-image that simply wanted to tell you at last what somehow had not been told.”

Just as this deeper revelation stoked the movement against the war, perhaps Sandy Hook will catalyze, not handwringing or rhetorical posturing, but a movement bent on the long-term task of building a culture of nonviolent solutions.

Who will build this movement? Perhaps it will be parents. Perhaps it will be children. In the 1980s, when the fear of nuclear war was at its zenith, psychotherapists noticed a dramatic increase in anxiety and depression among children rooted in the fear of an atomic holocaust and the lack of a future. Studies indicated, though, that children felt less of this when their parents were actively involved in the anti-nuclear movement, even if on a limited basis.

The trauma being felt in Newtown — but also likely being felt by schoolchildren and in school districts across the country in the wake of this abysmal event — will require much pro-active healing, including the transformative arts of psychotherapists, social workers, sensitive teachers, school administrators and parents. But in addition to school assemblies and candlelight vigils — all of which are critically important — they may also consider taking the next step. They may imagine being part of a society-wide movement grappling with the question: How do we turn things around? How do we reorient our culture from one that assumes that violence saves us to one where nonviolent solutions are the default? How do we build a nonviolent culture?

Parents and their allies could help deepen and widen the long-existing anti-violence movement, but its power could come from children of all ages leading and participating in this movement whose time has come.

Successful social movements help society change its mind. Our society’s mind is pulled in many directions on the question of gun violence. Now may be a moment when, once and for all, our society may be open to getting past the fears that keep a gun culture in place. This kind of thoroughgoing transformation does not come easily. It means alerting, educating and mobilizing
the populace to take a hard look at the kind of society we want. It is a long and trying and arduous process. But this will be critical to fostering a concerted national conversation on guns — but also on our own identity as people and as a society.

Must we wait for another massacre to take place for us to finally say things must change? Let’s not wait. Let’s declare that the line that never should be crossed has been crossed, and therefore action is needed now. As musician Jesse Manibusen’s lyrics in his song “Walking the Ways of Peace” suggest:

Now is the time  
We are the ones  
This is the place  
Walking the ways of peace.

By taking action — to pass gun registration legislation, to repeal carry and conceal legislation, to create immediate freeze on ammunition sales, as Sam Diener suggests, and to work for an outright gun ban — we will not only be making a critical contribution to a more nonviolent culture, we may be tackling the immobilizing anxiety, depression and fear that this horrifying event has likely generated.

All of us are called — by the gunfire from Newtown and our gunfire throughout the world — to walk the ways of peace.