

IN MEMORY OF SANDY HOOK'S CHILDREN AND OUR SON, MARK

December 15, 2012

*How many times can a man turn his head
And pretend that he just doesn't see?*

Bob Dylan, "Blowing in the Wind"

I write the day following what is for our family and friends the infamous fourteenth of December. Our 25-year-old son Mark was shot to death on that day fourteen years ago. Today, our family is joined in its grief by 26 others for whom the fourteenth of December is forever tainted with unfathomable loss. I write today to the community of Mount Desert Island, a community to which I was born, a community that raised me, a community that supported me and my family during our darkest days, and a community that continues to support and join in the celebration of Mark's living musical legacy these many years later.

I write as a fellowship trained Trauma Surgeon who has seen more than his share of brains splattered by bullets, faces mauled beyond recognition by shotguns, hearts broken beyond repairing, and families torn asunder. Too many times I have sat down with a stricken mother, desperately clinging to the hope of successful resuscitation of her severely injured son, only to be forced to say that he had died before I and my team could apply our best efforts.

When I was born, the delivering doctor said, "Well, it looks as if Asa has his little rabbit hunter." Asa, my grandfather, and his crew of buddies were avid rabbit hunters, and I was raised to follow suit. I loved it. I loved being in the winter woods, listening to the baying of the beagles, seeing my first Pileated Woodpecker, enjoying the yarns and stories told by my grandfather's hunting friends and reacting to the flash of Snowshoe Hare white with the bang of my .410 shotgun. I loved to dress out the rabbits, thus getting my first exposure to gross anatomy, my first look at the internal organs that make a body work.

The day came, however, when the taking of a life became pointless for me; that preserving and occasionally saving a life achieved the higher purpose. And so, I put the guns away, although I still have them.

I write not to add another voice to the deservedly righteous and, I believe, correct chorus for more effective gun safety laws without loopholes. I already support these measures and feel they do not jeopardize the appropriate use of sporting shotguns and rifles. I do not quarrel with those who choose to pursue the blood sports, for that is their right.

Consider this: our son Mark was not killed by a criminal. He was killed by a mentally ill man with a legally procured handgun. And so, while we may look outward and demand solutions from those agencies whose duty it is to protect us, it is really we who must look at and within ourselves.

Yesterday's tragedy in Newtown, involving for the first time young and completely innocent children, will doubtless fire a new round of introspective debate among our elected leaders. My hope is that they will reach beyond themselves and consult competent minds that may better understand the secret workings of deluded and abnormal minds. This was a mass killing and the weapon used was not a simple handgun. The AR-15 is a semiautomatic rifle with astonishing killing power. It was designed for the military, not for use on an innocent American public. How is it that an individual preparing to end his life appears to see no moral or other reason not to take others with him? Are we a society that is becoming so desensitized to violence that video games now appear to glorify assassins?

I have great faith in this Island community. We love our place, we love our kids, we love our schools. We care for each other. We see evidence of this time and time again. And I suspect, Newtown, Connecticut would have said the same thing two weeks ago. Could what happened there happen here? Because we cannot know the inner thoughts of every mind, we cannot possibly say. If we could admit there was even the slightest possibility, what would we do? What are we already doing? As I consider our community institutions--our schools, libraries, museums, churches, the YMCA and YWCA—it appears that we are doing a lot. Are we doing enough of the right thing?

Mark Horner's future was taken away from him and us. Yet, in his short life he had achieved a pinnacle of professional musicianship, attracted a wide circle of friends whom he loved dearly, and emerged a gentle and generous man. The young victims at the Newtown School were but beginning their life trajectories. Their disgusting and cowardly assassination should enrage, then arouse and inspire us to a higher purpose, that of treating more than symptoms, that of understanding and treating the underlying causes. Communities are where everything begins. Let us begin. We can do this.