

## Is the Bird Alive or Dead?

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I have passed through Newtown at least 10,000 times during the past 50 years, but the next time won't be the same. No, I need to amend and revise my recollection of the quiet, unchanging bucolic New England town with the tall flag pole, so that I can include it truthfully in the anthology of that sad collection of horrific narratives we Americans usually forget or are too embarrassed to tell our children, the one's yet born or too young to tell tales of atrocities. I speak about the massacres that have stalked us throughout our history; those perpetrated against Native Americans, Blacks, and protestors against injustice. Now history authors a new volume, one filled with stories about how we stood silent in the twenty-first century, when men, women, and children were executed by gun-wielding mentally ill, psychopaths and thrill-seekers. The first chapter rails over how boisterous voices and profiteers fanned our paranoia about everything from a government run amuck to the generalized notion we are made safer packing a gun. Newtown, Aurora, Blacksburg. . . Red Lake. . . Columbine, Greenwood . . ., violence that no civilized people would have tolerated becomes commonplace.

No, massacres are not new to the American way of life: but its current *modus operandi* is; and so are the perpetrators, not crazed mobs, posses or military forces, but lone gunmen, who have the presence of mind to acquire weapons, plan and carry out mayhem;—and so are the detractors who argue callously about Second Amendment rights trumping sensible gun laws; and so are those who deride treatment for the mental ill in favor of incarceration; and so are those that degrade and desensitize the value of life by peddling images of war and violence to the children.

We are story-telling animals, who aspire to explain our place in the Universe. It is a solemn business, which for all the parables passed down from generation to generation, ultimately speaks to the tradition that becomes our truth—one which informs what is right and wrong and what we must do to maintain our humanity. And, thus our obligation as reporters to future generation requires the courage to report the facts, all of them—and, not rationalized, sweetened by personal gain or cast in bitter political ideology. What story do we tell our child, our neighbor, ourselves, when maniacs kill men, women and children? Are they stories about the pluck to change our circumstance, or about how we cowered to the diatribes of a few paranoid citizens or the insensible corporation and those who give it voice, for no other ostensible purpose except profit?

Unregulated firearm sales make gun-moguls millionaires, while their products in the hands of men with minds fraught by illness or criminal intent make us childless. Every shot in every homicide by gunfire rips through the fabric of someone's family and the security of the entire society—it forces peaceful citizens to arm. What tale do we tell future generations? Is it the one where we mustered the guts to change the laws that led to this aberrant succession of

events? Or is it the one where we told them to arm themselves? Or is it that we told them that we did nothing, remained silent against the detractors, the hawks, leaving it to godless luck to decide who among us would be next. Like the student who planned to conceal a bird in his hands and ask the old man to guess what he was holding and, if he guessed a bird, the boy would ask whether it was dead or alive. If the old man guessed “dead,” the boy would let the bird fly. But, if the man guessed the bird was alive, the boy would crush out its life and open his hands to reveal a dead bird. The boy finally asked, “Is the bird alive or dead?” And the old man replied, “My son, the answer to that question is in your hands.”