

COMMON GROUND

Talking about Gun Violence in America

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PREFACE

I grew up in the 1950s in a quaint New England town. I was a member of a nearly 250-year-old Congregational church—a traditional, white, wooden structure on Main Street. It was a life right out of Norman Rockwell's paintings. My father was a high school teacher there for over thirty-five years, and both my parents were civically active. When it was time for me to start grade school, the town had just completed a new structure, and I attended there from first through fourth grades.

Like many people, after college I moved away and for the most part put my hometown behind me. A confluence of several factors—my mother entering a local care facility for the last years of her life, my classmates and I all turning sixty years old and wanting to reconnect, and the growth of Facebook—renewed my affinity with my hometown. A sister-in-law and her family still live in town. My niece's husband works as a custodian for the school system.

The town is Newtown, Connecticut, and the school where I started first grade was Sandy Hook Elementary School. On Friday, December 14, 2012, a man with a Bushmaster semiautomatic rifle shot his way into that school and killed twenty first-graders and six faculty/staff members. None of my friends or family members was killed, but friends of friends were.

My niece's husband was not at Sandy Hook School at the time, but he was pressed into special service for the arrival of President Obama that weekend, and early the following week he had to go into the school building to help remove food from the kitchen.

The nation was shocked, and we—the Newtown community—were plunged into intense grief. I shared my grief with my local congregation in the midst of that Advent and Christmas season. At a retreat two months after the shooting, I was convicted that my silence in the face of this violence was an acceptance of the status quo and that by remaining silent I would be complicit in future violence.

I started searching the Web and reading. I followed the responses of fellow Newtowners. I tracked both gun control and gun rights organizations online. I became an early supporter of Sandy Hook Promise because I liked the fact that they simply wanted to honor the lives lost, were open to all possibilities, and encouraged having the hard conversations on all the issues. I learned some of the history of gun violence in this country and legislative attempts to curb it. I read summaries of Supreme Court decisions on the issue. And I started having conversations about guns and gun violence in response to the promise I'd made. I have made it a point to have a conversation, not a dialogue, debate, or argument.

I'm a Christian and an American. I've been an ordained minister within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) for over thirty years and a professional geologist with Michael Baker International, a major civil engineering company, for more than forty years. For the past several years I've had the privilege of sharing conversations about guns and gun violence in a wide variety of settings. Some people have known I am a minister, and some have not. I've talked with lifetime NRA members and staunch gun

control advocates, and others across the spectrum between those extremes. Regardless of whether the other person has changed their mind or not, I have grown in knowledge and understanding of the various roles guns and gun violence have played in our individual and collective lives.

I have always approached these conversations prayerfully, aware that if I look and listen I will see and hear Christ present, regardless of any individual's claims early in our time together. Christ was a unique individual, and we too are each unique individuals. Within our uniqueness, we all are made in the image of God and are beloved of God. There's a popular saying many Christians claim: "In the essentials unity, in the non-essentials liberty, and in all things love." It's not intended as an excuse to avoid critical self-examination or lively conversation. It does remind us that thoughtful Christians are free to have opinions that are radically different than ours. Our challenge is to love through those differences, honoring each other in those differences as we each seek to follow a common God. This is especially critical in today's polarized atmosphere around the topics of guns and gun violence.

As you go through this book, my prayer is that you, too, will grow in knowledge and understanding of this deep and complex issue. You can choose to read and reflect on the topics in this book on your own, or you can organize a small group to talk about it together. Have a conversation: with yourself, with members of your congregation, or with others. At the start of your conversations, don't be surprised if others don't feel the same way about guns and gun violence as you. We each come with our own stories, and we grow by listening and sharing our stories with each other. Welcome all, regardless of how crazy you might secretly think their perspectives are.

Throughout the book, I will share my personal history. This is for illustrative purposes only. My story is my story, and the details are not exemplary. You are encouraged to develop and share yours. I will share as both a Christian and an American, and I encourage you to do so also. I mention various books and movies throughout the book, and more are listed in the back. These resources can offer additional perspectives and information on the issues at hand.

To help you get a sense of how wide open this issue is, think for a moment about your coworkers, members of your congregation, and others in your community. Do you know gun owners? If you know people with guns, are they hunters or recreational shooters? Do you know people who have a concealed-carry permit and routinely carry a handgun?

Does anyone you know wear a gun as part of their occupation? Are they in law enforcement, or do they work for a security firm? Do you know people who have served in the military or are serving now? Do you know anyone who collects guns? Have you ever seen anyone wearing an NRA baseball cap?

Do you see vehicles in local parking lots with decals, magnets, or bumper stickers indicating support for gun rights or gun control? Do you have friends who are vocal proponents of either of these groups? Are you uncomfortable when they start talking about guns or gun violence? You are not alone!

Let's explore guns and gun violence in America together. We can gain the confidence we need to speak what we each individually believe on this important and controversial issue.

Chapter 1

OWNING OUR STORIES ABOUT GUNS AND GUN VIOLENCE

Our views on social and political issues are not formed in a vacuum. The stories we bring to the table are essential to understanding our own perspectives and those of others. So we begin by reflecting on our childhood exposure to guns, experiences we've had in adulthood, and other influences that have shaped us.

GUNS IN OUR CHILDHOOD

Each one of us has a unique history with guns. I've already shared a little of my background, including that my father taught high school. For most of that time, until I was in middle school, he taught vocational agriculture. I grew up on a small farm that was his showcase and a proving ground for his students. We mostly grew table vegetables: sweet corn, tomatoes, squash, lettuce, cucumbers, beans, carrots, beets, and so forth. We also had a full orchard and other fruits: strawberries, raspberries, peaches, plums, cherries, pears, and apples. We sold fruits and vegetables from a picnic table under a maple tree at the end of our driveway.

I was the youngest of four sons, and we each also raised animals: heifers, sheep, goats, chickens, turkeys, and

rabbits mostly. Often if townsfolk had an animal that had grown from a cute baby to an unmanageable monster, it would end up at our farm. All our animals were raised for sale or meat, except the farm dogs and barn cats, of course.

It seemed that everyone knew everyone back then. At least I had the distinct impression that everyone knew my family and me. Between my father's long tenure teaching and the sales at our truck farm, I didn't think I could ever get away with any troublemaking, and it seemed I was always too busy with farmwork to have the chance anyway. Looking back, I realize I had a very privileged early life.

Growing up in that environment, I can't remember the first time I shot a gun any better than I can remember the first time I hoed a row of corn, sawed a piece of lumber, mowed the lawn, or drove a tractor. When it was decided I was old enough, the tool was put in my hands and I was taught how to use it. Using it included knowing where it was kept so I could clean it and put it away when I was done. I learned how to fix and maintain the tools I was expected to use. And that applied to guns in our home.

The guns were kept in the main hall closet, leaning against the back wall. Shotguns were in the left corner, and long rifles were in the right. Most of the ammunition was kept on one end of the hat shelf above the coat rack in the closet, although some of the .22-caliber bullets were kept in an upper kitchen cabinet where they were more readily accessible. Throughout my time on the farm, a .22 rifle was my weapon of choice in the war to protect those vegetables and fruits from varmints: woodchucks, raccoons, squirrels, and birds of all sorts. I had a couple of different .22s to choose from, but I generally reached for a hefty Remington. The bolt action never seemed to eject the spent shells, but I liked the feel of the rifle so much I gladly put up with

that nuisance. I inherited that favorite rifle, and I have it still today.

My brothers and I had lots of toy guns while we were growing up in the late 1940s and throughout the '50s. Most of the time we didn't bother with the caps for those guns that supposedly used them. I still have a futuristic paper-popping handgun; it looks like something right out of Flash Gordon. I used to have a toy flintlock pistol in my Davy Crockett days. We had military-style guns and rifles to use while rewinning World War II. We had Dick Tracy-style pistols to fight modern crime. And, of course, we had Western six-shooters for playing cowboys. I still have a Mattel "Fanner 50" handgun with part of its holster. Sometimes my guns were as simple as a pointed finger or a piece of bent wood broken from a tree. I won't say we played with guns all the time, but I will confess that we had a parakeet whose favorite phrase was "Stick 'em up! Stick 'em up! Stick 'em up!"

When we played, we recreated what we watched on television. We watched a lot of Westerns on our trusty black-and-white TV. TV studios seemed to crank out one series after another: *Wanted Dead or Alive*, *Cheyenne*, *Maverick*, *Sugarfoot*, *The Rifleman*, *Have Gun—Will Travel*, and similar shows were in strong demand. There were old Western movies and serials, and stars from those had their own TV shows, too: Hopalong Cassidy, Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and others.

Consider how your childhood home and family environment shaped your awareness of guns. If you grew up on a farm, like me, chances are you were exposed to guns as necessary tools. Or perhaps one of your parents was in law enforcement or enjoyed hunting. Maybe your family had one or more guns for self-protection.

Think about how the era in which you grew up affected your experience of guns: Were movies more about gun-slinging cowboys or laser-shooting space weapons? If you grew up in the 1980s or '90s, conversations around guns may have centered more on the appropriateness of certain video games. Your parents may have objected to guns as playthings. All of these childhood influences are powerful in shaping our visceral response to the role of guns in our culture.

ADDRESSING GUNS AS ADULTS

As we reach adulthood, we are exposed to more harsh realities surrounding the use of guns and more complexity than we understood as children.

I came of age during the Vietnam War era. I went to college, but several of my friends went into the military. The government instituted a draft lottery while I was in college, and more of my friends enlisted. Friends joked that I won that lottery. My draft number was one, so it appeared inevitable that I would get drafted immediately after college. I went through most of the preinduction process, which started by my declaring whether or not I was a conscientious objector. My moral and religious background did not include a refusal to bear arms. I had been baptized and confirmed in the local Congregational church, but I also was a Connecticut Yankee farmer prepared to fight for what I held dear.

Even though I went away to college, during those summers back on the farm I dated a hometown girl. We were married in that white Congregational church on Newtown's Main Street after I completed four years of college

and before I returned for a fifth and final year at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI). The military draft ended before I graduated, so I wasn't called to serve.

After college, my wife and I moved from Newtown to western Pennsylvania. The move introduced us to another culture. Coal mines and steel mills were still in operation. Social stratification was determined by ethnicity, from the Scottish owners and Irish managers to the Eastern European mill hands and miners. Pennsylvania has a well organized fish and game commission, and within the commonwealth there are many large land tracts set aside for hunting and fishing. Most rural families with roots in Pennsylvania hunt or fish. Many of these traditions are based in the desire to put meat on the family table in spite of low wages received in the mills and mines. Now they are expressed in the tradition of Deer Day. The first Monday after Thanksgiving is the first official day in Pennsylvania for deer hunting using a rifle. Many rural schools are closed on this day to allow young people to hunt with their parents. For a young person, shooting their first deer is a true rite of passage. On Deer Day, the woods are full of hunters, and shots can be heard coming from many wooded areas. I am not a hunter, but we live in the country and have enough woods on our property that others usually hunt there. Often they share the meat when they are successful.

My wife and I have been blessed with two sons. Having children often prompts serious conversations about guns. My wife and I had several such discussions when our boys were young. I first became aware that she had a very different background with guns during those discussions. I wanted to give our sons toy guns, but my wife was opposed to the idea. As I pressed her for reasons, she began to share stories from her own childhood.

During her early childhood, she had lived in the city of Bridgeport, Connecticut. She and her family would occasionally hear the sound of gunshots coming from the streets outside their house. Her father felt the need to have a gun in the house to protect his family. He was a first-generation Italian American. He had experienced prejudice during World War II and responded by enlisting in the army during the Korean War. My wife's father used to wave a pistol around at home while saying to his children, "I brought you into the world, and I can take you out of it." He'd learned that from his father, who was a butcher by trade and would say the same thing while wielding a meat cleaver. With perceived threats both inside and outside the home, my wife was terrified of guns.

As you might imagine, guns became one of those issues that had to be worked out in our marriage. The Christmas after our older son turned three years old, I wanted to give him a Western outfit, complete with a pistol. My wife would have nothing to do with it. I didn't see what the problem was. From my perspective, it was perfectly normal. I bought the outfit, and he received it that Christmas. My wife saw this as a classic example of my failure to hear her side of the story. I asserted my right as the father of a son. At first, she asked me to consider how much our son liked play-acting what he saw on TV, and how his having a toy gun could make him more violent. I protested that I had played with all sorts of toy guns and that I thought I turned out okay. It was only after she opened up to me about her own history and her own fear of guns that I took her seriously. I respected and appreciated her honesty. I also had to admit that giving our son a gun was something I wanted to do, not something he wanted.

We settled on allowing our boys to have only anachronistic or fantasy guns. I was able to give them toy guns representing the old Wild West or those similar to the ones used in Star Wars movies. I kept my guns out of sight. My rifle was broken down, with the bolt separated from the barrel and stored under lock and key. My toy guns are in a storage bin.

OUR EXPOSURE TO GUN VIOLENCE

My earliest memory of gun violence was Ernest Hemingway's suicide in 1961. I read about it in magazines of the time, but we didn't discuss it in my family. I still have vivid memories of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald, and JFK's funeral. I remember the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy in 1968 and the aftershocks those deaths caused. Watching network news, special reports, and nightly broadcasts on our black-and-white TV during that violent summer of 1968 made a lasting impression.

Until a few years ago, other than my wife's issues, I never gave guns or gun violence much thought. Then an esteemed colleague and mentor committed a murder-suicide. His wife had terminal cancer, and he apparently couldn't bear it. One morning, he shot her in her sleep, called the police to report it, and then shot himself. A year before the Sandy Hook Massacre, one of our older son's best friends from high school committed suicide. He had been battling depression most of his life. The weekend after Thanksgiving he parked his car on a bridge and turned a shotgun on himself.

For some people, witnessing gun violence—whether through the news or the experiences of family and friends—makes them want to limit the availability of guns. For others, seeing such violence in the world makes them see guns as a necessary means of protection.

SUZANNA GRATIA HUPP'S STORY

Suzanna Gratia Hupp was born in Arizona and from a very young age loved to play with toy guns.¹ She and her older brother would role-play Westerns, cops and robbers, and army with a collection of toy guns. When her brother was ten, he was given a Red Ryder BB gun by his parents. Both she and her brother learned safe handling of firearms using that BB gun. By the time she was nine, her family had moved to Texas. Soon after moving, she was watching some boys who were shooting a pellet gun. As one boy passed it to another, the second boy put his finger on the trigger, causing it to shoot a pellet that hit Suzanna in the right arm. The pellet lodged fairly deep, so the wound was cleaned, stitched, and bandaged. After several weeks, the pellet had migrated to just under the skin, so a second simple procedure removed it. It was Suzanna's first experience as a gun victim. The incident and its aftermath impressed upon Suzanna the importance of vigilant gun safety. She'd learned to respect all guns and handle them safely, but she now realized that not everyone had learned those lessons. She needed to be on guard when people around her were armed.

During her college years in Arizona, Suzanna was introduced to shooting real firearms at inanimate targets, and she enjoyed the sport. She soon bought her own handgun

for sport and self-defense. Returning to Texas after college, she soon acquired another handgun, even though it was illegal at that time to carry a handgun, open or concealed, in Texas. However, she knew she was a “good guy” and justified breaking the law on occasion. Then, in social conversation, she discussed her dilemma with someone in law enforcement. He urged her to carry her weapon every day and to take other precautions to avoid being a victim.

That advice reinforced her commitment to be vigilant in all phases of self-protection. She routinely did all the rituals the officer had suggested to her when approaching her car or her front door. She assessed the conditions and verified that no one was hiding or lurking where they shouldn’t be. She typically had her hand on her firearm in her pocket while doing the assessment.

She got to use her firearm once to save her sister’s cat, by shooting a rattlesnake that had frozen the cat in place. Both Suzanna and her brother-in-law heard and understood where the snake was at the same time. She grabbed her pistol and ran to get within close range, while her brother-in-law went inside to get his shotgun. His shotgun was locked in a rifle safe, and the shells were locked in a separate cabinet. While he was inside, she shot the snake dead with her pistol. She is convinced the cat and not the snake would have been killed if they had to wait for him to unlock the safe and gather up the shotgun and shells.

On October 16, 1991, she joined her parents for lunch at a buffet-style chain restaurant in Killeen, Texas, called Luby’s. She was friends with the manager on duty that day, so he joined them. It was “Boss’s Day,” so the place was busier than usual. As she sat down in the crowded cafeteria, she made a mental note of several other friends and acquaintances nearby. After their main meal, they got

coffee and dessert. Her friend the manager was called to help deal with an issue in the kitchen.

Suddenly a pickup truck smashed through the front window and stopped about fifteen feet from their table. At first Suzanna thought it was an accident. Then she heard gunshots and thought it was a robbery. Her father flipped over their table to act as a shield, and the three of them—Suzanna, her father, and her mother—hid behind it. The gunshots continued, and when Suzanna peeked around the table she was surprised to see the driver simply shooting one person after another.

She thought she could grab her purse and get her gun, but then she remembered deciding that the time she would need it would be when she was in her car late at night, not in a crowded restaurant at lunchtime. So instead of the gun being in her purse, it was in the parking lot in her car.

Her father decided he had to do something, so he lunged at the attacker. The attacker simply turned and shot him with one of his two guns. That action got the shooter to change the direction of his walk through the restaurant. Meanwhile, in the smoking section, someone had managed to shatter a back window. People were pouring out through the broken window to escape the scene. Suzanna decided to take a chance, urged her mother to come with her, and then ran through the window herself. Once outside, she was reunited briefly with her friend the manager in charge, who directed her to a safe place across the street. After a few minutes, she started to come back toward the restaurant and recognized a local policeman. As soon as the “all clear” was given, they approached the restaurant together. Through the manager, Suzanna learned that both of her parents were dead. Later, she learned that a total of twenty-three people had been killed.

Suzanna was angry that the law did not allow her to carry her firearm into the restaurant. She had the opportunity to take a clear shot and has said in many interviews since that she could have ended the shooting much earlier if she had had the gun with her. Soon after, she decided to advocate for the right to carry concealed firearms. She testified before the Texas legislature and saw a concealed-carry law go into effect in January 1996. She then became a state representative herself. Suzanna Gratia Hupp continues to fight for Second Amendment rights.

GABRIELLE GIFFORDS'S STORY

Gabrielle “Gabby” Giffords was also born and raised in Arizona.² Gabby was exposed to a variety of cultures and life circumstances early, which led to her decision to work in public service, especially in the areas of education, health care, environment, and immigration reforms. She entered politics in 2000 as a member of the Arizona state legislature. Arizona has very liberal gun laws, and while serving there she supported gun rights. She had a personal handgun, a Glock 9mm.

When Gabby decided to run for the U.S. Congress in 2006, gun rights were not high on her agenda, and she favored keeping guns out of the hands of those who are mentally ill or convicted felons. Consequently, the National Rifle Association (NRA) gave her a “C” rating and nominally supported her opponents. Nonetheless, Gabby was elected by her progun constituency and was serving in the capital when, in 2008, the Supreme Court struck down and Congress repealed the handgun ban imposed on people in Washington, DC. At the time, she stated that the law was

contrary to a long tradition of gun ownership in the United States. Her legislative district included not only Tucson but also Tombstone, and she learned not to be surprised at seeing constituents carrying firearms.

Gabby ran for reelection twice and won both times. Whenever she returned from Washington to Arizona, she made a point to go out and meet her constituents. Typically, she held simple “meet and greet” events at which she did not make speeches but had conversations about issues of interest so that she could be informed when she returned to DC. Gabby called these events “Congress on Your Corner.”

Her third campaign, in the fall of 2010, was the toughest and closest, but she won reelection again. Immediately after the first week of the new session of Congress, she returned to Arizona to hold a “Congress on Your Corner” event outside a Safeway store in a suburb northwest of Tucson. The event was organized by her district director and her local community outreach director. It was scheduled to start at 10 a.m. on Saturday, January 8, 2011. That morning, staff members and friends arrived a little early, as did Gabby. They set up tables and a banner. John Roll, Arizona’s chief federal judge, was one of the friends who came out to wish Gabby well. Other people who wanted to thank her, encourage her, and just meet her started to form a line. They signed in and waited their turn.

Shortly after the event began, a young man approached the table and said he wanted to meet Gabby. He was told to sign in and wait his turn. He went to the back of the line, but at about 10:10 he rushed back to the table. He pulled out a 9mm Glock pistol with a thirty-three-round magazine and shot Gabby in the head at point-blank range. He then turned and shot her district director, her community outreach director, and the federal judge. He turned again and

started shooting his way down the line of people. He went through the thirty-three rounds in less than a minute.

The shooter also had two fifteen-round magazines with him, but he fumbled when he tried to reload. Several people rushed him, some pinning him to the ground while others grabbed the magazines and the gun. A man with a legally concealed pistol in his pocket came running from a nearby store, saw the man holding the shooter's gun, and told him to put the gun down. Fortunately, both the man with the legal pistol and the man who had disarmed the shooter acted and reacted calmly. If the legal gun owner had shot first to disarm the man holding the gun, without telling him to put it down and waiting for a response, the mass murder could have ended with the accidental shooting of someone who helped stop the violence.

The shooter had a history of mental illness, did not trust the government, and specifically wanted to assassinate Gabby Giffords. At the end of the shooting spree, five people were declared dead at the scene, a sixth—a nine-year-old girl—was declared dead at the hospital, and thirteen were wounded.

Gabby managed to survive but was in a coma for a week. In less than two weeks, she could stand with assistance. In a month, she could speak a little. The bullet, however, had paralyzed much of her right side. She had to struggle to walk, her right arm was completely paralyzed, and her right peripheral vision was gone. She learned to write left-handed using an iPad. She had weekly speech-therapy sessions.

Her husband, former astronaut Mark Kelly, became her spokesman. They worked together on what to say and where to invest their time and energy. Initially, Gabby went back to the floor of Congress, but within a year she decided to step down.

They thought about how she had represented Tombstone in Congress. The most famous gun battle there, at the O.K. Corral in 1881, was about gun rights and gun control. Back then, Tombstone had an ordinance that people had to surrender their guns when they arrived in town. Officially, the Earps were acting to enforce that ordinance, which the Clantons chose to ignore. When Gabby was shot, anyone over eighteen in Arizona could carry a loaded weapon openly, and anyone twenty-one or older could carry concealed weapons. Even people with a criminal record and mentally ill people could not be denied that right. It seemed to Gabby and her husband that common sense had been abandoned.

They talked about gun violence and what they might do to make a difference. The massacre in Newtown on December 14, 2012, drove them to action. They reached out to their support network to see if funding could be available through donations. It was. Next came the name. While serving in Congress, Gabby was always a moderate, trying to be reasonable and responsible. As Mark later wrote, “We knew what the name should *not* contain: no *guns*, no *rifles*, no *control*, no *violence*. We weren’t *against* anything; we simply wanted to bring people together to solve real problems.”³ They named the organization Americans for Responsible Solutions and publically launched it on the second anniversary of the Tucson shooting.

REFLECTION AND CONVERSATION

Suzanna Gratia Hupp and Gabrielle Giffords were both born and raised in the southwestern United States. They both survived mass shootings, and both were spurred to respond. Each chose her own path. While the paths are

different, each is true to her personal history before the shooting.

Using the questions below, reflect on your own personal history with guns and gun violence. If you are reading in a group, consider setting a timer for each person to share their personal history (questions 1 through 3), then continue to discussion of subsequent questions.

1. What was your exposure to guns while growing up, both real guns and toy guns, and in the media you consumed?
2. How did your thoughts about guns change as you became an adult, got married, or had children? Do you own any guns now? What types?
3. What do you remember about gun violence in your past? What is the first violent gun death you remember hearing or reading about? Have you ever witnessed or been directly affected by gun violence? Was it an accident, a suicide, a murder, or a shooting during war?
4. Why do you think Suzanna Gratia Hupp and Gabrielle Giffords came to such different conclusions about placing limits on the right of citizens to own and carry firearms? What are some factors that might have played a part in shaping their positions?
5. Do your opinions lean closer to Hupp's, Giffords's, or somewhere in between? Why? Can you understand how people can come to different conclusions? Can you articulate in a nonjudgmental way the opinion of those with whom you disagree?