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Sen. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., hugs another member of the Republican congressional baseball team following a shooting in Alexandria, Va. (CNS photo/Shawn Thew, EPA)

The shooter at the ballpark where congressmen played, who injured several before being killed himself, bought his semi-automatic rifle more easily than high-potency Vitamin D. Certainly it was easier to get than painkillers. You don't need a prescription to get a gun. All you need is the will, a wallet, and two hands. In fact, you don't even need two hands: the guns today fire so fast, one will do. You don't even much need two eyes. You can do all the damage you want with your eyes closed.

I suppose this should be old hat to most of us. It is to me. But something about the shooting on June 14, 2017, at a baseball field in Alexandria, Virginia, that critically wounded two—including Rep. Steve Scalise of Louisiana—violated my well-built-up defenses and cynicism about violence in America.

I know the statistics—how every two years more Americans are killed by guns than during the entire fourteen years of the Vietnam War. I know the demurrals of the kind offered by President Obama and others after Orlando and Sandy Hook and San Bernardino and Santa Barbara: “Life is tragic.” I learned

that on August 2, 1985. That was the day my unhinged sister took the life of our sixty-year-old father and then took her own. So I know life is tragic, and I'll never not know it, every day of my life.

Prior to this family disaster, I was one acquainted with guns. I hunted birds as a teenager. I shot an M-1 while training to be an Army officer. I lived in Alaska for two years, one in a cabin twelve miles outside Fairbanks with no running water and a roommate who shot snowshoe hares out the front door while cartridges landed in my typewriter. I know what it means to enjoy a thick, juicy moose steak from a friend down the road. My good friend, the writer John Hildebrand, who lives in Wisconsin, has a hunting rifle or two and once kept a pistol in Alaska bear country where the two of us built his cabin. The cabin was later overtaken by the wilderness.

I know nature and the heart of man. And that, untended, unloved, the heart grows dark indeed. But we cannot legislate anger out of existence or legally ban it from the human heart. Nor can we outlaw mental illness. It is part of the mystery of the overwrought human brain—which is one beef I have with the Creator. I have no explanation, not even in my faith, for my sister's suicide, nor the ten-year schizophrenic torture that preceded it. As Edgar says about his mad master on the heath in *King Lear*, "Who alone suffers, suffers most i' th' mind."

Nor, finally, can we legislate kindness. Yes, we can and should enforce laws against hate crime, to encourage social, political, racial, and gender justice. But you can't pass a law making people hold a door for an old lady.

So then what can we do about an angry, mentally unstable, and unkind man shooting up congressmen while they're fielding grounders? The answer should be painfully clear, even—or perhaps especially—to our money-besotted, deer-in-the-headlights, stupefied political representatives themselves. Get rid of the hardware of rapid-fire death! Otherwise, congressman, you are destroying your own ball game. And our civil life with it.

"Absolutely no one is responsible for this deed except the individual who carried it out," wrote Charles Lane in the *Washington Post* the day after the shooting. He is wrong. The fact is, every congressman who has not given this country what the vast majority want—major new controls on the hardware of easy death, and with it the chance for a respite from terror—bears some responsibility for this shooting. And that includes, with terrible irony, Representative Scalise himself, who has been in the forefront of relaxing gun laws—sponsoring a 1999 bill in Louisiana that protected gun manufacturers and gun-store owners from lawsuits, as well as 2011 federal legislation that allows concealed-weapons carriers to cross states lines nationwide. Will Scalise rue the day he earned his A+ rating from the National Rifle Association?

Much was made of the need for more congressional security after the Alexandria shooting, and there was praise of the armed guards who acted to save the scene. But a different, more troubling conclusion can be drawn, though almost no one drew it. The only security guards on site were Scalise's and they clearly and tragically did not protect him. The simple reason: when a shooter uses a rapid-firing military-style gun, the bullets come too fast. The shooter brought home this basic fact in a matter of moments. In the process he scared a republic where it breathes—at a baseball park, where the elected representatives of our cherished democracy were exposed like children. This was a violation of a sacred American cultural space—from home to the fences—a place of joy and fellowship. We were all shaken, even more than usual.

But is Congress?

I have watched with growing incredulity the violence taking over American life since we lost my sister

and my father within seconds on that hot August morning thirty-two-years ago. In the aftermath our family did everything it could to promote saner gun laws. My mother met with her congressman, Rep. Anthony Beilenson of California, who went on to provide a key vote in the 1996 assault-weapons ban. We sued the store that sold my sister the gun, with no evident qualms, while she was in the midst of a visible psychotic episode. Even though the case was thrown out by a judge's contemptuous and contemptible ruling, the store's reckless behavior finally caught up with it (a mother pleaded in person with the store not to sell a gun to her suicidal daughter; they did anyway, and the girl killed herself). Now it is mercifully out of business. But other such stores thrive, and guns pass easily through the mails and internet with even less scrutiny. Click on "Gun," add to cart. Why does this continue to be tolerated?

When a shooter uses a rapid-firing military-style gun, the bullets come too fast.

Over the years, cynical and misleading myths about guns, gun safety, and the Second Amendment have been routinely and soundly exposed. Most of the reputable, non-partisan studies (such as the landmark 1993 *New England Journal of Medicine's*) show that having a gun in the home is simply a bad bet—that the chance of that gun in your dresser drawer saving you from harm from an intruding stranger is miniscule, while possession of a firearm doubles or even quadruples the odds of your being shot (see also Charles Branas's 2009 study in the *American Journal for Public Health*). It is far more likely that the gun will be used against you, seized for an impulsive suicide, or stolen or fired in a domestic argument or accidentally by children. To put it simply: the possession of a handgun in the home puts you and your loved ones at greater risk. (Harvard's David Hemenway discovered in a 2015 poll of 150 scientists who research firearm usage that a significant majority, 64 percent, had found that the gun makes the home a more dangerous place, versus only 5 percent saying it made it safer. Fully 72 percent found that having a gun in the home for "safety" increased the risk that a woman would be a victim of homicide.) As to the absurd scenario of armed moviegoers firing like mad to stop a malevolent gunman: out of 160 active shooting incidents between 2000 and 2013, there was only one in which an armed civilian took down the shooter, according to the Armed with Reason website.

Then there's the big red herring that criminals will always get guns no matter what laws are passed. Even if true, it is beside the point. The fact is that the great majority of those who shoot and kill the ninety-three people shot to death in America each day (and two hundred more critically wounded) had not been criminals before they fired. The Alexandria shooter, James Hodgkinson, had not been a criminal. Adam Lanza, who killed twenty children and six adults at Sandy Hook School, had not been a criminal. Dylann Roof, who killed nine black people studying the Bible at church in Charleston, South Carolina, had not been a criminal. And on and on. The rapid-firing thing *creates* a criminal, not vice versa. Without it you merely have someone who is angry, or depressed, or lonely, or racist, or psychotic. But not catastrophically lethal.

Two hundred twenty years of court decisions made clear that the Second Amendment does not guarantee the right to bear arms before *District of Columbia v. Heller* in 2008 was pushed through by an NRA flush from its many victories—and still the case carried by only one vote. I don't have to tell Catholics who have moral qualms with abortion that any one Supreme Court can get something wrong. Certainly Japanese Americans know as much from the 1944 *Korematsu* decision. Anyone who can grasp sentence syntax can see that "the right to bear Arms shall not be infringed" in the Second Amendment is introduced and qualified by the dependent clause, "A well-regulated Militia being necessary to the security of a free State." The Second Amendment is clearly talking about the formation of a National Guard in the early days of the republic, and has nothing to do with every Tom, Dick, and Harry buying guns. We have a National Guard and a police force. Let them do their jobs.

If this is all true, if the myths have fallen, then why do we find ourselves in such a place of peril? Why

have things gotten to the point that we are afraid to go to a movie, a mall, a political rally, and—God forbid—a baseball field? Why are those of us who try to talk sense about guns reduced to bailing water as the NRA and others continue punching holes in our security day by day, to the point that there are many states where a person can carry a pistol out in the open, as if the entire country were Dodge City? Guns can now be toted on many college campuses—in classrooms—by students. (Only sixteen states currently ban concealed weapons at colleges.) What's next? Guns with your ice-cream cone?

It's both surprising and instructive to discover that most gun owners themselves are not comfortable with loose gun laws. Gun-violence expert Matt Valentine suggests that even rank-and-file NRA members are not particularly enthused by the extremist measures its lobbyists promote ("The NRA Wants Policies that Most Gun Owners Don't," *Washington Post*, July 18). Polls show that even in conservative states like Texas and Utah, most residents oppose open-carry and guns on college campuses. Clearly, the millions of dollars that gun manufacturers—many of them foreign-based—pump into NRA lobbying efforts have successfully bought Congressional votes. It's bribery of the most craven sort.

"I'll say one thing about hunting, especially if you field dress and butcher your own kill," says Hildebrand. "You learn the effect of a bullet as it enters the body and shatters bone, muscle, and organs in its path. The exit wound is always much bigger than the entry wound. Because congealed blood and bone fragments ruin the meat, I always have to trim a great deal. I imagine that's what a surgeon in an ER might have to do with a gunshot victim. People who buy military-style black guns generally have no sense of what happens to a living target."

There are really only two ways to deal with the increasing violence in our society: more guns or fewer.

Now Congress's laxity over guns has put itself in the crosshairs. But what Congress gave, Congress can take away. It's still possible for legislators to make this country safer—and themselves as well. There are really only two ways to deal with the increasing violence in our society: more guns or fewer. The former approach held sway during the listless Obama Administration and a George W. Bush administration that let the assault-weapons ban lapse in 2006. But boosting the proliferation of guns doesn't work. Over and over, making access to guns harder—not easier—has been proven to reduce violence. To pick only one recent example, a 2013 study in *JAMA Internal Medicine* revealed that expanded background checks reduce the number of police officers shot to death in the line of duty by 53 percent, and women shot by intimate partners by 47 percent.

So in the spirit of a national-health emergency, here are eight common-sense suggestions, some already demonstrated effective, that focus and draw on the Preamble to the Constitution's call for Congress to "insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare":

Ban sale of any rapidly repeating weapon to anyone who is not a security professional.

Ban sale of any gun to anyone who has spent time in a mental hospital or has been prescribed medicine for mental illness within a reasonable period prior to the attempt to purchase.

Ban sale of any gun to anyone on a terrorist watch list.

Institute a comprehensive one-month background check for gun purchases.

Ban sale of any weapon over the internet or through the mails.

Require gun registration just as we require car registration, in the understanding that anything as powerful and potentially destructive as an automobile or a firearm should be trackable.

Federally fund buy-back drives for those willing to turn guns in for money, especially assault weapons.

Federally fund increased community policing throughout our urban areas.

Finally, here's a suggestion directed at my Catholic community specifically (though open to all of a similar mind), dedicated as we must be by dint of Christ's injunctions to be peacemakers and to oppose violence and revenge: Organize a series of peaceful demonstrations (as was done recently in Chicago) in front of gun shops throughout the country.

It's worth noting that reasonable efforts to curb gun violence through responsible gun management inspire a consensus considerably broader than many assume. The consensus reflects implicit agreement about the daily attitudes most Americans expect and hope fellow citizens will take with one another. The conservative-leaning columnist Kathleen Parker, a friend of libertarian Rep. Rand Paul, expressed this hope while reacting viscerally to the ballpark shooting. "We can't uncrazy crazy, but we can each try to stem the madness," Parker wrote in the *Washington Post* ("Our New Life in the Dugout," June 17). "It begins with simple caring: By looking up from our cellphones and making eye contact; by asking the checkout girl about her day; thanking the garbage collector; doing favors without a scorecard; giving away money because someone needs it more. Sometimes a small gesture of kindness can change someone's day—or life." I couldn't agree more. My mother once said a smile is the simplest, best gift you can give to anyone.

The importance of such humane priorities receives reinforcement from a recent study done in the Netherlands at the University of Groningen. Unsurprisingly, it concluded that American gun owners crave their guns because they feel threatened. But of two types of threat—a specific threat of assault or "a diffuse threat of a dangerous world"—the owners overwhelmingly turn out to be motivated by the latter. In a word, fear. That fear is corrosive to the human soul is a recognition put forward by many philosophers and writers, including the Pulitzer-prizewinning novelist and Christian thinker Marilynne Robinson, who asserted in her 2015 book, *The Givenness of Things*: "Fear is not a Christian disposition."

It's true. Where fear contracts, Christianity opens. Fear lives by suspicion and regards people from afar; Christianity is a close-up thing, and lives by acts of love (prayer, too). Christ taught us there is no other way than love—and love, as any lover knows, requires vulnerability. The defensive crouch of fear versus the open embrace of love: they are two very different animals. Perhaps among Americans Franklin Roosevelt put it best, and in the throes of the Second World War, no less: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

As I have indicated, I have no quarrel with hunters, and have enjoyed living in the company and friendship of rural people who routinely use weapons for game. And I understand deeply the impulse to have more security; I get why someone might think that stashing a pistol under their pillow could help. But I have lived too long beneath this cloud in my life and have watched too many people across the country slip into its shadow themselves—their loved ones sprawled in blood in places they were shopping, or dancing, or playing ball. We are at war with ourselves. And we have to find a way to stop it, before our common life breaks down completely.

This isn't rocket science. You can't get at this problem by outlawing anger or mental illness, or by mandating kindness. You have to get rid of the hardware, and you have to do it now.

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