

New Essay by Patrick Medema: Being Acquainted with Violence



I was in junior high the first time my friend was bullied. This was during the late 1990s, before we could maliciously attack someone from our phones or smart devices, when belittling someone took a personal touch, away from keyboard. I wasn't there but the bully had hit my friend, nothing serious, no broken bones, just a little hurt pride. However, when his father found out, he got in touch with my father and together they agreed that my friend and I needed to learn how to defend ourselves. I wasn't asked, I was told that I would learn to fight. Thus began my acquaintance with the practice of violence.

I've never thought of violence as being "evil." I was taught that violence is a tool, the same way a gun or a knife is a

tool. And while violence isn't the solution to every problem, the proper application of violence can be a good thing. There are limits though, a time and a place to call it quits before violence begets violence or you find yourself on the wrong side of a jail sentence. That being said, I've never understood pacifism, the idea that violence serves no purpose or that civilized society has no need for violence is a joke and a poor one at that. Violence can be a good thing, a necessary thing so long as you understand its proper application. It's a thin, hazy line at times but a line nonetheless.

After the decision was made, my first acquaintance with violence came in the form of a boxing ring. Boxing, or Pugilism to the sophisticant, is an art. There's a finesse to it that is lacking in the more popular mixed martial arts. It's hard to explain to someone that's never done it but it's like a dance, a graceful and violent series of motions, second nature to the practitioner but magic to the people watching.

It's easy throwing a punch but throwing a punch well, that's the trick, and it's not all about throwing punches. The secret to being a good fighter is making the other guy miss, going blow for blow with a guy doesn't mean you know how to fight, all it means is that you can take a beating. Sometimes that's enough but there's a difference between a brawler and a fighter. This is the way I was taught to fight, with style and finesse and, most importantly, with my head. But, for all the talk of magic and finesse, boxing is all about the show, it's a sport. Two equally matched fighters in a ring with a referee and gloves isn't the same thing as a brawl in the street. In the ring, your title may be on the line but odds are that you're going to walk away afterwards. There is no such security in the real world, a fight in the street or a brawl in a bar could end up costing you your life, whether that means a cell or a box.

Knowing how to fight in a ring or an octagon doesn't means you

can handle yourself on the streets, where we visit violence upon each other not for sport but for real, where anything can happen and anyone can catch a beating. The man that places all his hopes in his ability to perform is a fool, especially when violence is involved. Just because you can fight, doesn't mean you should. There are no guarantees in a fight. It doesn't matter if you're the greatest fighter in the world; if you go looking for a fight, you're going to find one, one you might not be able to win.

The thing about violence is that even when it's justified, it doesn't mean that your problem will be solved. In life or death situations, violence can save your life. In a combat zone, violence is a daily occurrence and while you are justified in defending your life, or the life of your comrades, there are consequences. The harming of another human being is anathema to our souls. The long-term effects of war and posttraumatic stress disorder are only now being fully realized as so many of our veterans are struggling to overcome the mental and emotional scars of facing and perpetrating violence. Even a simple street fight can have long term repercussions. A fist is a little like a bullet, once it's been fired, everything else that happens afterwards is on you, the good and the bad.

My father was, and is, an old-school kind of guy. His father, my grandfather, was a cold man, detached and distant from his children, a veteran of the Korean War and a champion fighter. My father grew up in a time when streets and neighborhood were sacred and you defended them at all costs. My father was a good fighter and good fighters earn a reputation. There's a certain mystique when it comes to neighborhood tough guys, those guys that people cross the street to avoid, the way the room gets quiet when they walk in. It's intoxicating, the kind of power you can cultivate with the threat of violence. But neighborhoods don't last and when the neighborhoods went away and he was forced to participate in society, my father brought

his reputation with him. And, as a teamster in Chicago during the 80's and 90's, a penchant for violence was a good thing.

Thus, a man who thrived on violence, or the threat of violence, and who chose to isolate himself from others raised a son to believe that violence was an easy way of getting what he wanted and that people in general were only useful if they served your needs. If they couldn't help, then they were discarded. If they could, then they were cultivated. And, if they threatened you, you hurt them. Growing up, it got to a point where it was easier sizing a person up for a fight rather than getting to know them. I'll be honest, I'm not sure which came first, the ability to commit violence or the ability to isolate, but it's a symbiotic relationship. Turn yourself off to people and you start to lose interest in their well-being. Once that happens, hurting them isn't all that difficult. Not when you're the most important person you know.

When violence is an easy means of dealing with a person, that person's value as a human is diminished. The amount of time you're willing to invest in a person is directly proportional to the value you attribute to that person. Why waste the time talking to them, understanding them, empathizing with them, if it's easier to just shut yourself off? It's a lot harder learning to live with someone instead of just hurting them when they don't do what you say or want. It's a time saver too. It's much faster to hit someone than it is to sit down and talk with them.

Devaluing a person means deciding that they are not worthy and therefore require minimal effort on my part. This is hubris, believing that I'm better by virtue of who I am and what I've accomplished, as if such things hold any real meaning. The funny thing about arrogance, you're never really as good as you think you are and there is always someone better. Diminishing a person's status to that of a "thing" is unnatural, it's a conscious act driven by our selfishness or, if we're being really honest, our insecurities and fears. This

is what relationships are all about, sharing who we are, imperfections and all, and having that vulnerability reciprocated. I dare say that kind of rejection is more painful than a punch to the face.

It wasn't until years after I'd joined the military that I started seeing people as being meaningful, not just "useful." So many of my problems with relationships were a result of my belief that people were just "things," an attitude I had chosen to pursue for so long. It sounds silly to say aloud but people have value, even the ones that you don't like. And while I still struggle to build and maintain relationships, they are worth the investment. And not only that, what kind of life is that, plotting, manipulating, using people to your own ends? Pop culture wants to glamourize it on T.V. and in movies but like everything else pop culture produces, it's a bunch of lies. Think about all the craven, sycophants trying to earn their way to the top. Is that how you see yourself? Is that how you want others to see you?

As long as we exist in relationships with each other, violence is a possibility. If we agree that some violence is acceptable, how do we avoid unnecessary violence? Who is our enemy? The guy that talks shit about you behind your back? So what? The guy that cut you off in traffic? So what? Your shitty neighbor down the block? Call the police if you have a problem. What good is violence in any of these situations? It's satisfying, or it can be, hurting someone. But what does it accomplish? What does it do for you other than cause more problems? In the right situation, violence can save lives. In the wrong situation, it can ruin them. If we value people and want to avoid violence then we must be willing to humble ourselves, to quiet that nagging voice that tells us every slight or perceived insult should be answered with violence. Life cannot be spent sizing people up in preparation for violence. Man was never meant to live that way.

I'm not an expert but it takes someone acquainted with

violence, comfortable with violence, to know when it's appropriate to use it. I feel bad for people that have been sheltered from violence all their life. These people are ill prepared for the reality that violence is an inevitable part of life. I don't think we need to revel in it but we need to be prepared for it. This isn't a rally cry for the Second Amendment or a revitalization of the "Affliction" mixed martial arts culture. If anything, it's an appreciation for those that accept violence as a part of life and are willing to use violence to protect others, our military, and our law enforcement.

But, even amongst our armed forces, what percentage have actually taken part in violence? And of that percentage, how many have the requisite maturity and experience to apply violence in an appropriate manner, enough to save lives but not so much as to appear savage or malicious. Ditto for our law enforcement. We want to believe that those charged with the use of necessary violence are grizzled, battle tested, level-headed men and women but the truth is that most of them are no different from the people they "protect." An oath of service or a badge doesn't mean you are exceptionally qualified to use violence. I'd go so far to say that the majority of controversy surrounding excessive force and wrongful deaths is not only a failure of judgment on the part of the individual involved but a lack of preparation on the part of law enforcement in general when it comes to the proper use of and application of violence in a high-risk situation. And I don't mean to second guess anyone, I won't play armchair officer, but we owe it to our police, and our military, to prepare them as best we can for a job only a few are willing to undertake.

I think it would be great if we lived in a selfless society dedicated to the preservation and betterment of man, where egos are non-existent and where people are valued as equals rather than treated like "things." But that just isn't the

case. Ego is a part of who we are. We can fight against our baser instincts but inevitably we all give into selfishness. In “civilized” society, there are times when the need for violence seems so distant but I urge you not to be so naive. The need is real. It’s with an appreciation of this truth that I continue boxing, attempting to perfect the art I started so long ago. The capacity for violence is like a cushion, a safety net designed to protect me and mine from the uncertainties of life. The trick is not losing sight of the fact that there is still a cost even if justified. This is how we keep our humanity while still being acquainted with violence.

On Gun Violence and the Second Amendment

America has a problem with violence, and specifically gun violence. This is a fact, not an opinion, and is confirmed with a glance at the statistics, backed up as well by abundant anecdotal evidence. On any given day or week I can cite the latest example of the most publicized gun shooting or campus massacre. This week, for example, three Muslim students studying dentistry at the University of North Carolina were shot in the head execution-style by a gun-loving lunatic and “second amendment rights advocate” apparently because of an argument about a parking space. It’s hard to see how the presence of guns in situations like these do not escalate arguments into tragedies. For every absurdly awful example we hear about like this, there are dozens more happening the same week that do not even appear on the news. Gun deaths, for the first time ever, have just passed car accidents as the single most common cause of death in America. There have been at

least 107 school shootings since the 2012 massacre at a Newtown, Connecticut elementary school (source [here](#)). There is, on average, one mass shooting incident a week in America, and this type of killing is only represents a small percentage of the overall number of gun killings. America is by far the most violent of the developed and rich countries, and is one of the most violent even among all countries. There are so many gun deaths that they are literally impossible to keep track of. After the Newtown massacre, the online magazine *Slate* attempted a thorough [crowd-sourced project](#) to keep track of every single gun death in America in real-time. Not only did it prove overwhelming, but they quit after tracking over 11,000 gun deaths in a year, which are only about one third of the estimated number. Including not only murders but also suicides and accidental shootings, there are 30,000 gun-related deaths in America per year, an astronomical number which is highest in the world by a long distance. Are we supposed to assume that it is a completely unrelated fact that America also has the highest number of guns, and guns per capita, in the world—somewhere around 300 million guns in a population of 310 million—almost one gun per every man, woman, and child in the third most populated country in the world. We have often heard the dismissal of such figures by gun activists and lobbyists with quaint slogans like “guns don’t kill people; people kill people.” That such a facile line could gain traction and still carry weight with many people shows the depth of the gun problem in America. To those who love guns and defend the right to bear arms, I would encourage you to hear me out. After all, the violence that plagues America is most likely to happen to those who have guns (as this [other article](#) in *Slate* also shows).

The Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is commonly believed to mean that every individual has the right to own any and all type of firearm he so desires. As we know, this law was written in the late 1700s in a new country with a dangerous frontier and a weak central government, and where

the latest firearm technology was the long rifle. It is not difficult to understand that the maintenance of personal firearms was allowed for defense against Indians and also to ease the financial strain on the small federal government which did not even have a standing army yet and would hope that state and local militias could procure their own equipment at their own expense. Anyone who thinks that the right to bear arms can somehow protect individuals against government tyranny, one of the main interpretations of the 2nd amendment, is living in the past. The differences between 1790s America and 2015 America are many, but they include the the presence of well-armed local and state police, National Guards, the most well-equipped military in the world, and a countless variety of federal intelligence, spy, and investigative agencies. No citizen can hope to have a fighting chance against such an array of centralized force of arms, and I think we have to assume that America is fairly secure in its borders and its democratic system of government; it is this that has to be appealed to for grievances and rights, not the fact that you carry a rifle or handgun. Anyone who thinks that the short line of text which calls for a "well-regulated militia" to mean, in the 21st century, the limitless right to stockpile highly lethal rapid-fire rifles with armor-piercing bullets and concealed handguns with enormous magazines probably missed the point. Even if I agreed that an endless supply of guns and bullets were necessary for self-defense against criminals or a potentially tyrannical government (which I don't), I would still at least hope for some serious limits and controls on who can buy guns and where. No such controls exist on the federal level, and each state has different laws and regulations, few of which are very strict (and if one's state has stricter regulations, by chance, there is no obstacle whatever to going across the state lines or using the internet to get any weapons you want and need).

It is much easier to get a gun than a driving license, for example. One may argue that cars kill people too, and even in

greater numbers (well, until last year when guns overtook them), so they should be regulated more. I am not arguing against regulations for cars and driving licenses – I'm perfectly happy with how things currently stand in that area; I am, however, arguing for more regulations and checks for guns. While the sole purpose of cars is a means of transport (which just happen to kill many people in accidents during normal use), the sole purpose of guns is to fire high velocity bits of metal into other things, living and non-living, to kill and destroy them. That is quite a significant difference of purpose, and negates the argument about how "people kill people" or how a variety of other things are also used to kill people, intentional or not (such as knives, cars, baseball bats, almost anything you can imagine); the difference, of course, is that only guns exist solely to kill people and animals, while all of the other things have other primary purposes as functional tools of some sort. I may be able to kill a person with a knife if I happen to be a murderously-inclined person, but it would be much harder to kill many people with that knife before I was stopped, unlike with high-powered guns with endless ammunition. And by the way, I happen to have many knives for cutting vegetables, opening boxes, and other dangerous daily tasks, but somehow do not feel any danger in owning these tools. Let me relate an anecdote: exactly the same day as a maniacal young boy shot and killed 26 people in an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut, a maniac with a knife attacked and injured 22 people in an elementary school in China. The attack in Newtown killed almost everyone who was shot, including mostly children, while in the attack in China, also involving all children, every single victim survived. This goes to show that while there will always be a certain number of crazed and murderous people around in any society, their murderous actions can be either very deadly or merely very disturbing but ultimately unsuccessful depending on the lethality of the weapons at their disposal. I think you can see that guns do, in fact, kill people. Lots of them. Nowhere as much as in America.

There are obviously good and bad aspects about any particular country, and America is no different. There are many great things about my country that I appreciate, but many things that I am uncomfortable with and ready to openly criticize, as is my right to free speech and free expression. I currently live in Italy, where my two young daughters were born. I imagine a return to living in America sometime in the future, but one thing that truly stops me in my tracks is the incredible and horrifying number of school shootings, and the apparent ubiquity of violence in general. This is not normal in a supposedly advanced, rich, and "free" society, and it does not occur anywhere in Europe or any other developed country for that matter. At this point, I can still say that it is almost impossible for me to imagine going back to an America where my children would be enrolling in schools that could be attacked by a demented lunatic at any time. It is not normal and not satisfactory. It is unconscionable that there has been no new legislation from the U.S. Congress at any time since the 2012 Newtown shooting, not to mention 13 years earlier at Columbine High School, the first school shooting that showed up on people's radar. At least after Newtown there was a huge public outcry and some initial movement on the issue, including the president saying that things must change immediately and there can be no more Newtowns. Well, nothing has changed, and there have been over 100 more Newtowns.

Here is another point of comparison: in Australia, in 1996, there was a mass shooting spree similar to the ones that happen in America every week, and 35 people were killed. The Australian government, with pressure and support from the citizens, passed a strict gun control law immediately after that incident and there have literally been no more mass shootings since then, gun homicides have dropped 60 percent, and gun suicides have dropped 75 percent. I doubt that the Australian people feel any less free for being thus safer than their American counterparts—in fact, the new laws, regulations, and a gun buyback scheme had the support of 85

percent of Australians.

That brings me to the point of freedom. America talks a big game about freedom, but actually there is so much talk about it that the word has basically become meaningless in most cases. We hear about people who actually want freedom to limit other people's freedom, for example. When someone talks about freedom to have guns, I think about my preferred freedom from being around people with guns. Does someone's right to have a deadly weapon outweigh my right to not be threatened or killed by these weapons just by living nearby? That is what we are facing in America. The number of guns is so high, they are so widespread and easily obtainable by anybody, and the limits and even consequences for using them are so non-existent, that I would not feel safe returning to America. You may say, "Fine, stay in Europe, we don't need you here." For the moment, that is exactly what I will do. I feel no danger whatsoever of people with guns, or the possibility of school shootings, in Italy (I also have free national healthcare, but that's another story). Anyone who wants a gun can go through the proper procedures and get one legally, usually for hunting, but the numbers are minuscule compared to America. The gun-related deaths are, unsurprisingly, also miniscule. Sometimes there are other rich countries with a high number of guns that are compared to America—Switzerland, for example, or Israel. These countries still have less than half the number of guns per 100 people than America, and they are much more regulated, or, in the unique case of Israel, used for a de facto military-police state where large numbers of conscripted soldiers walk the streets with their rifles. Even with a large number of guns per capita, these countries have a much lower incidence of gun deaths than America. So is America, in addition to being absurdly awash in guns (remember, almost one for every man, woman, and child in a country of over 300 million), also more violent and willing to use these guns than other societies? There must be a cause and effect relationship, though it is hard to tease out exactly the

effects from the causes, which probably both influence each other.

Humans are imperfect and sometimes violent, but when someone becomes enraged for some reason, it is going to become much worse and have the possibility to escalate quickly into a deadly situation when there are guns readily available. Many gun owners think they will be safer, but I would argue that actually the opposite is true. A significant portion of gun-related deaths in America are due to accidental firings, even involving young children playing and killing a parent or sibling in a tragically high number of cases. There is a thought experiment in game theory called the Prisoner's dilemma, in which two prisoners receive different sentences based on if they betray each other or remain silent. If A and B betray each other they will each serve 2 years; if A betrays B but B remains silent, A will go free and B will serve 3 years (and vice versa); if A and B both remain silent they both serve 1 year. By choosing logically in one's self-interest the prisoner would appear to have the best chance of going free, but if both choose based only on self-interest it would actually be a worse outcome for both. The point is that cooperation and some sense of shared fortune or fate is often a better choice than pure self-interest. This relates to guns in the following way: it is commonly believed that having a gun makes one safer from harm, but if everyone believed this then the community actually becomes less safe. The more guns there are, the more chance for gun violence, as we have seen with the statistics I gave earlier. If some people make a choice to not own guns, and be apparently less safe, it will actually make the community as a whole safer. I choose to not own guns, and I think my stance does in fact support the overall safety of a community, though an individual with a gun may possibly be safer on his own.

Despite so much killing, and mass killing, why are there not new laws and restrictions on guns in America? One of the most

shocking factors may be that the daily and weekly occurrence of gun crime, week after week, year after year, is often unreported, and when it is reported it has actually stopped being shocking to people. After all, humans can only take so much bad news before they inevitably start to tune it out and seek other distractions. There was a brief point of time after Newtown in 2012 when many people were again awoken from their unconcerned slumber and the forces were aligned to actually discuss gun control in a real way and maybe even do something about it, but soon most people lost interest and the moment passed. This brings me to the firearm manufacturing industry and its powerful lobby, represented by none other than the National Rifle Association. This lobby is highly skilled at the art of forceful persuasion of politicians to not attempt any gun control law, nor even discuss it. The NRA is possibly the most powerful lobby in the country and has been relentless in stopping all attempts at making the country safer, despite increasingly crazed and heartless rhetoric from its leader Wayne LaPierre about personal freedom that would make Jefferson and Madison blush. The fact is, it's not about freedom—when 30,000 people a year get killed by something we cannot say it protects freedom—but money. The arms industry is extremely profitable, to say the least, and it is obviously in their interest to insure that new customers continue to purchase new guns with no obstacles standing in the way of their profit. We see a similar thing on an even larger scale with the entire military-industrial complex, in which huge arms producers are always looking for the next war and the next huge government contract. With guns, the industry appeals to private individuals as well as state and federal agencies, police forces, and the military, which all need to constantly stay highly armed with the newest models and accessories. Local police across the country are more highly militarized than some of the army units I saw during two years in an actual combat zone in Afghanistan. When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Violence leads to more violence, and the guns flow only slightly more freely than

blood. In this environment, paranoia reigns and people who already have guns or consider having them will be convinced that they need to get even more before the big bad government comes to take them away and limit their freedom.

America, get yourself straightened out. This violence is not acceptable, and the people should not accept it any longer. People need to wake up and get involved. The cycle will continue until it is stopped. In the words of Johnny Cash, don't take your guns to town, son; leave your guns at home, Bill; don't take your guns to town.