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GUEST ESSAY

We Need Hope to Combat Violence. That Won't Arrive Without Action.

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By Rachel Louise Snyder
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What might have stopped the gunman from killing 21 people in Uvalde, Texas? In the aftermath of the shootings, familiar details emerged. We know he fought with his mother. We know he has been accused of posting footage of him seriously abusing one or more cats online. We know he shot his grandmother, who worked at Robb Elementary. We know he harassed girls on social media and when one of those girls reported him to a social media app, nothing was done. And most critically, we know he bought a weapon of war around his 18th birthday from a company that offered buy-now-pay-later-style financing. The process for buying the gun was little more onerous than that for purchasing Sudafed.

These facts and allegations just as easily might speak to many mass shooters of our age. Racism, misogyny, violence, isolation, gun access, social media screeds. In some form or other, the patterns are known. But why is it that when we identify them, we can't then prevent the carnage that follows? Or why won't we?

There are many places in the world that share America's social characteristics. Switzerland has a culture of gun ownership, too. Japan has young, isolated people so common, they have a name: hikikomori. Mental health in Germany and New Zealand is more understaffed than in the United States. And domestic violence is in every country, every community, every village and neighborhood. And yet — you know the end of this sentence — only the United States sees mass shootings so frequent that at least 38 more have occurred since the Uvalde shooting, according to the Gun Violence Archive.

Many believe they know the source of this national tragedy. Liberals say it's guns. Conservatives cite mental health issues. I've heard we need fewer doors and more fathers, less poverty and stronger friendships. When I looked at the faces of those 19 children killed in Uvalde, I had to wonder if our polarized politics, mine included, cloud our ability to see our failing social infrastructure, the complex intersectionality of the immense issues we face. Put simply: We have broken our society. So to what lengths are we willing to go to rebuild it?

Many years ago, on my first day as a graduate student, my professor asked us to write him a letter about ourselves. My first line was this: "I feel like I know what it's like to want to kill someone." My family life was fueled by rage. I was expelled from Naperville North High School in Illinois. At 16, I was kicked out of my house. I lived in my car and stayed on the couches of co-workers and friends and sometimes in the parking lot of Fox Valley Mall. I did not want to live, but I had neither the means nor imagination to die.

I despised my stepmother so much, I might have envisioned killing her. We fought with our words and occasionally our fists, and yet somehow, years later and reconciled, I sobbed at her bedside as she lost her fight with cancer. Even though I am beyond those years, I can call up the memory of that rage. I can understand feeling that the world has nothing to offer you. That your life is so devoid of meaning, you could take the lives of those who mean the most to someone else. And probably you wouldn't care how much you're hated, because no one could hate you more than you already hate yourself.

So how did the 18-year-old hopeless me give way to who I am now? I've asked myself this for most of my life. I am a professor, a writer, a mother, surrounded by the love of an intentional family. How did I survive?

For teenagers to survive what are for some of us the worst years of our lives, they need hope. I don't mean sentimental jargon from a greeting card. I mean hope from the vision of a possible future. Hope does not arrive, feathered, at one's doorstep. Hope requires action, movement.

Because the opposite of hope is despair. Had I gotten hold of a gun in my teenage years, I believe I would have used one on myself. I know this because of who I was and how I felt, but I also know this because the research backs it. In a study of 172 mass shooters in the United States from 1966 to 2020, only four were women (two of whom acted in partnership with men). Some research suggests that responses to trauma can manifest differently in men and women, though these differences are not universal. Studies have shown a link between past violent or traumatic experiences and externalized aggression among men to varying degrees. Women, meanwhile, engage in deliberate, nonsuicidal self-harming behaviors 50 percent more frequently than men do, according to a 2008 study, which can be a trauma response in some cases. Numerous studies have also shown a link between domestic violence and heightened suicide rates, which are particularly acute among men.

Perhaps we have more tools at our disposal than we know. A full 86 percent of mass shooters under age 20 give warnings, according to Jillian Peterson and James Densley in their book "The Violence Project." (Note: I provided a blurb for this book.) Dr. Peterson calls these warnings "a cry for help." The problem comes from how these warnings are interpreted and what people do or can do with the information received.

The threateners — almost always young men — reach out to classmates and to people on social media, and sometimes they are reported to authorities, as in Buffalo; Parkland, Fla.; Sutherland Springs, Texas; and Uvalde. And occasionally these authorities might step in, as they did with the Buffalo shooter, but then they could not hold him for more than a day and a half in a hospital for a mental-health evaluation. In the United States, only a third of primary care physicians' offices have mental health practitioners, compared with over 90 percent in the Netherlands and Sweden.

Mental health is a convenient lens through which to view mass shootings, but it provides an incomplete picture. The overwhelming majority of those who have mental illness are victims of crimes, not perpetrators. Often more germane to the question of stopping these crimes is domestic violence, which intersects with not only mass shootings but also many of the vast social issues that we face — and their consequences.

Domestic violence is a leading cause of homelessness in this country, especially for women. It speaks to gender inequality and teen dating violence and stalking. When you align it with guns, it becomes not merely another in a cascade of issues but *the* issue to address, because guns increase the lethality of essentially all domestic-violence-related situations.

Rates of domestic violence homicide increase fivefold with the presence of a gun. The easier a gun is to reach, the easier it becomes to succumb to a moment of desperation; a recent shooting in Tulsa, Okla., for example, happened less than three hours after the gunman legally purchased his weapon. And more than half of mass shootings are domestic violence: Sandy Hook began with the gunman killing his mother, Uvalde with the gunman shooting his grandmother.

But even those that do not begin with shootings of close family members — like the ones at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Fla., and at the Route 91 Harvest Festival in Las Vegas — have domestic violence in the background of the shooter's life. It's not always in the public data, but Dr. Peterson told me familial violence is present. "In every case, literally, whether it's parental, violence against Mom or physical abuse with a kid," she said, perpetrators' personal histories directly influence their shootings. "The worse the crime, the worse the story."

When Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas attributed the Uvalde shooting to a lack of mental health treatment — even after slashing funding for the state's department that oversees mental health by more than $200 million — he was not wrong. But his answer was incomplete.

The United States is suffering from a full-blown mental health crisis. In a 2020 report of 11 industrialized countries, the United States had the highest suicide rate and among the highest rates of anxiety and depression, coupled with the fourth-fewest mental health practitioners per capita among the countries in the study. Canada, Switzerland and Australia have roughly twice the number of mental health professionals that the United States has per 100,000 inhabitants.

And it's not merely lack of options; it's lack of resources. Health care is the No. 1 cause of bankruptcy in America. Children in Norway do not have to pay for mental health services. In France, those ages 3 to 17 can receive 10 free sessions with a psychologist. In their book, Dr. Peterson and Dr. Densley point out that for the United States to reach the recommended ratio of one psychologist per 500 students, 50,000 more psychologists would need to be hired across the country. The current national average is an abysmal one for every 1,500 students.

But mental health explains only so much. In the manifestoes that many of these young men leave behind, the language is eerily similar. The shooters in Buffalo; Charleston, S.C.; Santa Barbara, Calif., and others wrote racist or misogynistic diatribes. Such screeds point to the need for much more education and socialization.

How do many young people navigate this? They go to the web, of course, and too many young men wind up in the darkest, most hateful corners. Covid — which pushed most students online — gave children the time and capacity to reach those corners more readily while the world sequestered us all, a recipe for disaster. It seems no coincidence that gun violence and gun purchasing records were set in 2020, with 2021 continuing the violence trend and barely slowing purchases.

To suggest the solution does not start with guns — raising the minimum age for purchase; lowering the number of guns allowed per household; keeping guns from convicted abusers; instituting mandatory training, licensing and waiting periods; barring the ownership of assault rifles; enacting safe storage laws; eradicating immunity for manufacturers — is to willfully disregard the life and future of every person in this country. When Second Amendment freedoms mean imprisoning someone else (in a classroom, in a hospital, in a home), then freedom is nothing more than a bully with a pulpit.

Maybe we cannot build a life for every disenfranchised young person out there, but we can certainly do better. We need to have not merely one answer but many. We need to do it all, everything, all at once. And we can. We have the knowledge, the talent, the resources.

We need to address domestic and teen dating violence. We need to address mental illness. We need to address toxic masculinity and allow for open, inclusive conversations about gender identity. We need to regulate social media. We need to heed the warnings from girls online. We need to create crisis intervention teams, say Dr. Peterson and Dr. Densley, and suicide prevention and crisis response coalitions. They

also say we need to make sure that all students in this country have at least one person, just one adult, they can talk with.

For me, that person was a social worker named Bob Martin. He had a mustache that curled up at the ends and soft lighting in his office, and when he saw me in his doorway, he dropped whatever he was doing and listened.

So more Bob Martins and fewer guns. More hope and less despair. And then everything all at once, which really comes down to a single priority: a country where everyone can see the possibility of their own future. Because the fact is, broken things need not stay broken. They can also be opportunities to rebuild.

If you are having thoughts of suicide, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 (TALK) or go to SpeakingOfSuicide.com/resources for a list of additional resources.

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