

We are all mass murderers (and all victims)

By [David Lewicki](#)

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Every time there is a mass shooting, I imagine myself as a victim. Perhaps you've done the same. What would it feel like to be in the classroom ... the clinic ... at the Christmas party ... going about your daily life, only to see someone suddenly coming toward you with weapons? What would you do—what would you say—if the weapon were pointed at you? What does it feel like to have a bullet enter your body, to watch your blood pour out? To think, to *know* you will die?

Is it macabre that I imagine this? Perhaps. But it allows me to feel something of the terror of the victims in each of these murders. And it allows me to understand the grief of their families who feel most deeply the pain and terror experienced by their children, mothers, husbands.

This exercise fills me with a desperate rage about guns—how sinister they are. How their only use is to terrorize, maim, disfigure, and kill. I hate guns with passion. If it were up to me, they would be melted down and made into farm tools, in the spirit of Isaiah the prophet.

But there is another kind of act of sympathetic imagination that I suppose is even less common on the days of these mass shootings: **imagine yourself as the shooter**. What does it feel like to hold a gun and point it at someone with the intent to kill them? What goes through your mind as you carefully pull into a parking space in front of the school ... the clinic ... the room where people are celebrating a Christmas party ... with your trunk full of weapons, and your plan to end innocent lives? What does it feel like in the moment that you decide to kill others? What do you see in your victims' eyes in the moment before you pull the trigger? What do you hear in their cries of terror and pleas for mercy? What does it feel like to prepare an assault, carefully assembling and loading your weapons, putting on body armor like you put on your socks, planning out the day's schedule? What does it feel like to eat breakfast on the day you plan to murder innocents?

I find it harder to imagine the latter. When I do, I also feel terror, a different terror, a sickness in my stomach, the sickness of being alone and unspeakably sad. **What terror already occupies the mind of someone who decides that life—one's own and that of others—is worthless enough to end in a storm of fear, screams, and the shredding of tender flesh, in the disfigurement of bodies and memories?**

In the hours—even minutes—after mass shootings, are calls for "gun control." And the response from gun owners: these episodes are not about "us lawful gun owners" but about the "bad gun owners." Both sides heap outrage and moral indignation upon the another. One side imagines the law can rid us of mayhem and disorder. The other pretends the mayhem and disorder is not that bad or not our problem at all.

Both sides are right, but only in part—and both probably understand that their arguments about "gun control" and "gun rights" don't really address the deeper problems—they don't address what these mass shootings are really about.

Mass shootings are about us, as a people, as a culture. They are a mirror, showing us who we are. They show back to us our society, which fails to care for our mentally ill. They show us a society that pushes the lonely into hopeless, desperate corners, mutating in isolated pockets of the Internet. They show us a society that glorifies and reifies the use of violence to solve problems.

We are the mass shooters. They are created from within us and they bring into full view an aspect of ourselves that we would rather not admit exists, that we have allowed to persist.

Can we afford to go forward any longer with the illusion that these shooters are somehow other than ourselves? **We are a society that creates mass murderers.**

We are also all the victims of this violence. We bear the wounds. We grieve. We live with the burden of these horrible memories. We are at war with ourselves; we are murdering ourselves.

To confront these shootings in a way that could lead to healing requires reckoning with ourselves. They are a painful manifestation of who we are as a people. They show back to us the way we treat those in our families and

communities who are disturbed and anti-social. They show us the cultural narrative that we tell about how violence solves problems. I wish ending these shootings was as easy as enforcing gun laws or putting security guards in more places. But these solutions will only work only in part, not in full.

What may be a more constructive conversation in the days after these shootings happens when we stand in the shoes of the victims and the perpetrators. **Can we imagine a world in which each particular incident could have been stopped long before it ever became a thought in a person's mind?** What kind of social relationships should we nurture toward our mentally ill? What kind of care and community does every person need? How can we create the kind of security that acknowledges the reality of evil but moves toward the deeper kind of security—one that grows out of trust? How can we live with a deeper commitment to reducing violence in all forms: in the cultural stories we tell through the movies and television and sports, in how we conceive of the role of the military in human affairs, in religious life, in domestic disputes, in the ways we discipline and raise our children?

There are no easy answers. Violence and human alienation are rooted deeply in the soul and woven deeply into our social fabric.

But **the path toward healing—toward loving the victims and the perpetrators—must at least begin by asking the questions that grow from a sympathetic imagination.**

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