

The gun conversation I wish we were having

By [David Lewicki](#)

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I appeared at a press conference several weeks ago at the state capitol building to support a legislator's proposed bill to ban assault weapons. The legislator knew the bill wasn't going anywhere in the house, but **she expressed a desire to "start a conversation" about the role of weapons in our culture.** She came with life-sized photos of the weapons in question, to ask whether these objects belong in homes.

Immediately after the press conference ended, a representative of the gun lobby swooped in to address the press. He said if any legislator tries to take away citizens' constitutionally-protected weapons, they will be killed ... at the ballot box.

There it was: the misaligned battle lines of the gun conversation. Gun control folks expressing their revulsion toward guns. Gun rights folks refusing to talk, retrenching behind the Second Amendment. It's passionate. And pointless.

I talked about Jesus. Jesus, I said, was given the chance to take up arms at the end of his life, when his own life was in grave danger. "Those who live by the sword, die by the sword," he said. Weapons are not the answer to fear for our lives. Christians put our faith in a greater power, I said.

I felt pretty righteous. Jesus is awesome when he backs you up on what you already believe. It's easy for me to casually dismiss the arguments of gun owners. I've never held a gun or fired one. I'm terrified of them. Truth be told, I'd rather die by one than kill with one.

A few days later, the phone rang. It was a member of my congregation. We laughed and joked for a minute or two, before he said, "*So why do you want to take away my guns?*" He heard me pause. He continued, "*I own one of the weapons on the list of guns that proposed legislation would ban.*" More pausing. Some

explanation of how he got it and why. Then this, *“Do you really think the Georgia Bureau of Investigations should be going into people’s homes? Do you honestly think that banning these weapons is going to solve the problem of gun violence?”*

And that’s when it happened: we began talking to each other, not around each other. It was a real gun conversation. I said to him, *“it doesn’t make sense to me to want to own some of these weapons. They were made for the battlefield, not the home. Where do we, as a society, draw the proper line?”* He listened and agreed it was a legitimate question. He said, *“You’ve got to realize that whenever gun control people start talking about confiscating weapons, you betray your disgust for us. It makes us gun owners think you would take away all our guns, if you could.”*

We talked a bit more and **we agree that what we both want is for fewer people to die from gunshot wounds.** The question is how to get there. What works? We asked whether there were legitimate criteria upon which to decide certain guns are too dangerous: is it the size and type of the bullet? The size of the magazine? Concealability? My friend suggests that capacity is a big issue—there’s a difference between five rounds and 30 in terms of the potential harm. We agreed that training was an important part of safety. And setting reasonable and enforceable parameters on who could buy guns, when, and where. I asked about “gun insurance,” similar to car insurance. And we agreed that no matter what laws are made, much of the problem of gun violence comes down to people—difficult, disturbed people who need loving communities of support and access to mental healthcare.

It was a hopeful conversation—the only hopeful conversation about guns I’ve had of late.

Here’s what each side of the debate can do to create more hopeful gun conversations. First, both sides can say up front, “what I want is for fewer people to die from gun shots.” Then, work from there:

For gun-control advocates:

1. **Don’t threaten to take people’s guns away.** Let constitutional scholars debate the Second Amendment. In the meantime, respect it.

2. **Learn why gun owners own their guns.** Ask them. Don't assume you know the reasons. Don't assume you know what a gun owner needs. Some people have weapons for hunting, for self-defense, and some collect weapons for the aesthetics.
3. **Focus on data.** What is documented to reduce gun violence? Back up assertions with facts.
4. **Handle a gun.** That's a commitment I'm making. I need to know more about guns—what they feel like; what they do. I'm going to ask my friend for a tutorial. I may not shoot one—the idea still terrifies me—but I'm going to learn more.
5. **Trust gun rights advocates** when they say that it's the people using the guns that are the problem, not the guns themselves. What would it mean if solutions to gun violence focused on people first, the devices second?

For gun-rights advocates:

1. **Come out from behind the Second Amendment.** Talk about what your guns mean to you. Why you buy each one. What you do with them.
2. **Ask gun-control advocates what motivates them.** Why do they not like guns? Don't assume you know the reasons. Not everyone wants to take guns away.
3. **Focus on data.** What is documented to reduce gun violence? Back up assertions with facts.
4. **Support the traditional gun-rights platform of safety training and background checks.** You have the highest interest in keeping our culture as safe as possible. It's reasonable to expect that training and licensing be prerequisites for possessing such powerful and lethal objects.
5. **Trust gun-control advocates** when they say that it's the easy access to guns that makes violence inevitable. People's violent impulses will never be controlled, and making guns less accessible to those under the spell of such impulses will reduce the number of gun deaths.

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