

In the wake of Parkland, Florida

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News from Parkland, Florida, pries the lid off of a memory. A student shot a teacher two classrooms away from mine. Reports back then indicated that if he could not get to her, he'd get a priest. The teacher survived, but did not teach again. Both of us priests wonder which would have been the secondary target.

Our struggle to figure out school shootings is handicapped by thinking that they are like puzzles. There is no one solution. But we have not fully plumbed the questions, as if we could. Interested parties talk past one another without knowing it.

Yet to be established is what philosophers call a "conversation plane." This is about dialoging on agreed levels, one at a time. Years ago, a book popularized an example of the difficulty in "Women are from Venus, Men are from Mars." Communication about violent acts involving firearms is more complex. It involves whole communities and multiple layers of government.

Let me suggest some of the mixed levels that inform our perspectives. Always a first gambit, some people want to make this a debate about the second amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

A second level is about how much force is needed to keep order. There is a long tradition of firearms in hunting for food, for protecting livestock from predators, and watching over one's family when living in relative isolation. Most people can agree on the principles at this level.

A third level is mythological. Firearms are part of the American story. While we are 4 percent of the world's population, 42 percent of worldwide firearms in civilian hands are in the United States. I will have to talk to Mom about her thoughts when boys, including me, scouted our neighborhood with toy guns. When I was 7, my small bolt-action M-1 replica rifle was no more out of place than a set of Crayolas. Today, special clothing companies can help us civilians conceal firearms on our persons, almost as if we were accommodating a fifth limb. Maybe the smartphone already enjoys that rank.

In a fourth dimension, we can only observe a paradox. You have heard the expression, "It's impossible to look away from a car wreck." It is hard to look away, then to admit we sometimes don't want to. There is a saying in the news business, "If it bleeds, it leads." Have you noticed how after a mass shooting whole continents seem to disappear from the news for days? Obviously, millions of us are tuning in to witness sad scenes. As much as we don't wish destruction on others, we have to wonder whether we have become violence voyeurs.

Again to the question, how do we "wrap our minds around" awful firearms attacks? I have no comprehensive response. But too many resist bettering our society by staking out a hard position only in logic, law, myth, or a para-lust for graphic tragedy.

It seems sensible to pursue tighter firearms and ammunitions regulation. Might our society's inability to set limits be due to a "disordered affection" from which a Lenten Preface II asks God to free us? There is a spiritual problem staring at us.

Demonizing devices or organizations will not be the most productive tool for insuring safer communities. As we enter adulthood, we find that the most difficult decisions are not between a good and an evil. Rather, the toughest choices are in choosing among goods. The surviving teens in Parkland, Florida, are asking us if we think they are worth making some changes in laws and processes. They want to know if we will back it up when we tell them they are dear to us. So far, they are hearing too many people saying "yes, but ..." They won't forget.