

Hello Everyone,

My wife and I joined this church last spring, and we appreciate the outreach of this welcoming congregation. We moved to this beautiful area 2 ½ years ago from Michigan where we were members of the Grosse Pointe Unitarian Church for nearly twenty years.

So, I'm here today to talk about a topic that has stirred an emotional, and divisive debate across the country...gun violence. Like racism, immigration, and the environment, I believe, along with many other faith leaders, this is a subject that needs to be discussed in churches....as part of our mission to engage in practice and service for love, justice, and peace.

Gun Violence is a subject my family and I are painfully familiar with. I was shot and nearly killed a dozen years ago while walking into a television station in Detroit...a place where I was once employed. The perpetrator... a young man with a severe mental illness. There was no confrontation, no attempted robbery...he just pulled a firearm out of his pocket and shot me point blank. It was a living nightmare, a nightmare I share with an estimated 200 people who will be shot in America on any given day. Since April 15, 2005, I have been in some form of pain 24/7...some days better than others, but it is always present, my companion for life.

Now, this incident didn't immediately provoke me into any kind of political action. I was busy learning how to walk again...dealing with the relentless pain of a spinal cord injury...trying to return to work...raising a teenage daughter. Then "Newtown" happened. I, like most Americans were horrified by this tragic event where 20 children and 6 educators were killed at Sandy Hook elementary school. So suddenly I found myself writing down my very personal feelings about this shooting. These thoughts turned into an Op-Ed piece that ran the Detroit Free Press under the title "The Other Side of the Barrel." I chose this title because it seemed that the well-funded voices of the NRA had the ears of congress...more so than thousands of victims impacted by gun violence...the people on the other side of barrel so to speak.

Since arriving in Hendersonville, I have been an active member of the local chapter of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America. Moms was created after Sandy Hook...with chapters all across the country. Our local group consists of Moms and Dads....veterans....and gun owners, who believe we can support the Second Amendment, and still pass common sense legislation that doesn't infringe on the rights of responsible gun owners to purchase firearms for hunting or personal protection.

A little background on my incident. Through court records, and some investigative reporting, the gun used in my shooting was originally purchased at a suburban gun show by a licensed gun owner. Subsequently that weapon...along with other firearms was stolen from his home... according to the gun owner. A believable story...more than 200,000 guns are reported stolen each year from private homes and cars.

Yet, the cops didn't necessarily believe his version of events. They speculated the guns weren't stolen from his Detroit home...but he sold them illegally on the streets of the city. No concrete proof...but police told me this is a common practice in big cities like Detroit...Chicago...St. Louis etc

One more thing I'd like to add about the night of the shooting. After my wife, family and friends came together at Detroit Receiving Hospital, a good friend asked my wife Sara and if there was anyone she wanted to call. My wife said please call my minister. That night our longtime UU minister, John

Corrado, led family members and friends in prayer...and I needed them. You never know when your church home will be called upon.

So, I don't see gun violence as an abstract statistic or political battle...it's personal. When I hear about a shooting, my heart goes out to the families of the victims...I can't imagine the unbearable grief.... but I also think about the survivors. Spinal cord injuries that put them in a wheelchair for life...brain injuries like the one former Rep Gabby Gifford suffered after she was shot at a campaign rally. I have some insight into their suffering and the challenges they'll face for the rest of their life. Virginia Tech, Columbine, Newtown, Charleston, Orlando, Las Vegas, Sutherland Springs Texas...the news cameras eventually leave, but the pain and suffering remains for survivors, families, friends, the community as a whole.

That's why I'd like to invite you to view the powerful documentary "Newtown", showing at the Flat Rock Cinema on Dec 11th. The film is an intimate account of how parents, educators, and first responders tried in their own way to make sense of what happened that horrible day five years ago. There will also be a vigil at Historic Henderson County Courthouse on Friday, Dec 15th, where we will remember...and the read the names of the young victims of this terrible tragedy I'll have information and sign-up sheets about both events in the Fellowship Hall after the service.

First, let's look at some of the alarming statistics about gun violence in this country

- Americans make up less than 5% of the world population, yet own more than 40% of the world's guns
- In 2016, 104 people a day were killed by guns on average
- 438 people were shot over the past Thanksgiving weekend...148 people died from their injuries.
- Gun Homicide rates in American are twenty times higher than other developed countries.
- Road Rage incidents involving a firearm have more than doubled from 2014-2016
- In a typical year, more preschoolers are shot dead in America than police officers
- So far this year, 253 kids have been unintentionally shot or injured by a unsecured gun...almost one a day.
- Women are 16 times more likely to be shot and killed than women in other developed countries...many in domestic abuse situations. I heard somebody put in this way. In England, a man might get angry and drunk and put his wife in the hospital, but in America that women could very likely end up in a grave.
- On average, there is one mass shooting a day in this country...defined as 4 or more people killed in one incident.
- Medical Care for gun violence patients is estimated to cost about 4 billion a year. Who pays for that?
We do.

For me, the issues aren't about gun control or gun rights. I look at gun violence as a Public Health Emergency requiring a public health response...and I'm not alone in that feeling...so does the American Medical Association.

Let me say something about mental illness, since I was shot by a paranoid schizophrenia. Recently President Trump claimed that we have a Mental Health problem...not a gun situation. Well...to start...

people with mental illnesses are more likely to be *victims* rather than *perpetrators* of violence, but I do acknowledge that access to Mental health services is an issue that needs to be addressed in this country. Yet Mental Health services wasn't a priority in the latest proposed health care plan. Services and access were compromised, not improved, especially for the poor. And earlier this year, President Trump signed legislation revoking a rule that denied people with severe mental illnesses to legally purchase a gun. Now these aren't people that suffer from mild depression or eating disorders, but people who need a trustee to manage their day-to-day affairs.

At the sentencing hearing for the person that shot me, Epifanio Rivas Jr., I had a chance to read a victim impact statement to the court. I said, while I believe Mr. Rivas is a danger to society, I don't blame him personally for the shooting. I blame a broken mental health system that didn't provide him and his family the access to services and medication to properly treat his disease.

Look, if the President and Congress strongly believe Mental illness is at the heart of our gun violence problem, which I think is a strong over simplification, then put your money where your mouth is.... or at least provide the resources to study to the potential solutions to the gun violence epidemic in America...but Congress is not allowed to do even that...legislation prevents any funding for the Center of Diseases Control and Prevention to study gun violence. Congress didn't used to be so intimidated by one lobbying organization.

When lung cancer was linked to cigarette smoking...the tobacco lobby fought hard to refute the research. Yet science prevailed.... government eventually acted...cigarettes were taxed at a higher rate...and we now have smoke free zones in about any public place you can think of. Personal liberties were compromised for the betterment of public health.

To combat death and injuries on the nation's highways, the government mandated seat belts...then airbags. Did this stop car fatalities? No, but these measures have saved lives.

When a terrorist tried to unsuccessfully detonate a shoe bomb on an airplane several years ago? What happened.... our government immediately mandated everybody remove their shoes at airports. Nobody died in this failed attack...but government responded...why for public safety and health.

In the largest mass shooting in American history, the Las Vegas gunman used an accessory called a "bump stock" ...turning a semi-automatic rifle into an automatic one...yet legislation or regulation to ban this accessory is stalled in Washington. Guess what...bump stocks are back on the market, after the manufacturer suspended sales after the Las Vegas massacre.

So, I see three responses as we move forward with this issue

1. We do nothing...kind of where we're at now. The narrative, that nothing can be done legislatively to prevent gun violence. It's the new normal. I find this to be a very hopeless reaction that I can't accept... because there's nothing normal about shootings in our schools, college campuses, businesses, churches, nightclubs, and yes even TV stations.
2. Two, we follow the NRA agenda...more guns in the hands of more "good guys." Eliminate gun free zones...allow teachers to carry firearms...make it easier for people to obtain Concealed Carry Weapons without training or permits. I understand the reasoning...people are afraid, you

never know when gun violence might happen in your community. As a victim of gun violence, I don't live my life in fear, and in my opinion, more guns adds more fuel to the fire.

3. Three, pass reasonable gun safety legislation starting with shoring up our background check system and eliminate loopholes...ban bump stocks...and invest in research and technologies to diminish our gun violence epidemic. It is not a hopeless situation. Look how far we've come with automobiles...with collision avoidance technologies on the horizon. And while new Federal legislation has been impossible to pass, there have been some victories in the states. Massachusetts passed a bump stock ban recently...And earlier this year in North Carolina, legislation that would have eliminated criminal background checks for handgun sales and allowed Guns on College Campuses was stopped in committee, partially due to lobbying by Moms groups across the state. So, I am hopeful....and I know a little something about hope.

I remember one morning I was lying in my hospital bed at the Rehab Center in Detroit ...several weeks after my shooting. Outside my window, I could see it was a warm and inviting day in May. I wanted to walk out to that sunshine, but I was a prisoner in my bed. I couldn't walk, or barely move my legs.

I was in pain, physically and mentally

I was watching TV, and there was a Friday morning concert on the Today Show with one of my favorite bands....U2.

They started to play a song "Beautiful Day" the chorus goes like this....

It's a beautiful day

Don't let it get away

Touch me, take me to that other place

Teach me, I know I'm not a hopeless case

In the middle of the song, I started to cry...not just cry but sob. My beautiful days seemed to be slipping away, and I felt like a hopeless case. A wonderful, kind nurse was in the room and noticed my tears. She asked if I was alright, then came over to my bed and held my hand. Then she told me in so many words, you are not a hopeless case, Beautiful days are ahead of you....and she was right!

Yes, I still wish I could go for long walks and trail hikes. I wish I didn't live with paralysis and 24/7 nerve pain. We all have to live with the cards we are dealt, but we can determine how to turn hopelessness into purposeful action.

I hope you can find the beauty in your day-to-day life, no matter what unforeseen circumstances you face. And I hope you become engaged the gun violence issue.

Finally, thank you for letting me share my story.

--John Owens

Talk presented at UUFH, 12.3.17