

Education and Study Circle Resources

Many religious bodies, denominations, and other religious organizations have developed educational materials to discuss violence and peace with justice. They may be supplemented with the following. Make copies of the following resources, "Dear God! When Will It Stop?" by Marian Wright Edelman and "The Right to Bear Dreams: It's Time to Stop the Nightmare of Child Gun Deaths," by Shannon Daley-Harris. Distribute them to read and discuss in small group settings, such as adult education classes, women's groups, or men's groups. (Congregations from traditions other than Christian may wish to omit the final paragraph of The Right to Bear Dreams.) Use the discussion questions at the end of each as a jumping off point for your group's reflection and action.

Dear God! When Will It Stop? By Marian Wright Edelman

The horrendous news from Newtown, Connecticut has pierced our hearts. A black-clad man in his 20s armed with two semi-automatic handguns entered the Sandy Hook Elementary School and made an elementary school for kindergartners through fourth graders the scene of the worst mass shooting in a public school in American history. Twenty children were shot and killed. Seven adults were shot and killed. We don't yet know how many were wounded. We do know dozens of parents are experiencing the worst nightmare any parent could imagine. We do know more than 500 young children in the school are traumatized.

Once again we are faced with unspeakable horror from gun violence and once again we are reminded that there is no safe harbor for our children. How young do the victims have to be and how many children need to die before we stop the proliferation of guns in our nation and the killing of innocents? The most recent statistics reveal 2,694 children and teens were killed by gunfire in 2010; 1,773 of them were victims of homicide and 67 of these were elementary school-age children. If those children and teens were still alive they would fill 108 classrooms of 25 each. Since 1979 when gun death data were first collected by age, a shocking 119,079 children and teens have been killed by gun violence. That is more child and youth deaths in America than American battle deaths in World War I (53,402) or in Vietnam (47,434) or in the Korean War (33,739) or in the Iraq War (3,517). Where is our anti-war movement to protect children from pervasive gun violence here at home?

This slaughter of innocents happens because [we protect guns, before children](#) and other human beings. Our hearts and prayers go out to the parents and teachers and children and the entire Newtown community that has been ripped apart by each bullet shot this morning. We know from past school shootings and the relentless killing of children every day that Newtown families and the community will never be the same. The Newtown families who lost children today will never be the same. The families of the teachers who were killed will never be the same. Every child at the Sandy Hook Elementary School this morning will never be the same.

Each and all of us must do more to stop this intolerable and wanton epidemic of gun violence and demand that our political leaders do more. We can't just talk about it after every mass shooting and then do nothing until the next mass shooting when we profess shock and talk about

it again. The latest terrible tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School is no fluke. It is a result of the senseless, immoral neglect of all of us as a nation to protect children instead of guns and to speak out against the pervasive culture of violence and proliferation of guns in our nation. It is up to us to stop these preventable tragedies.

We have so much work to do to build safe communities for our children and need leaders at all levels of government who will stand up against the NRA and for every child's right to live and learn free of gun violence. But that will not happen until mothers and grandmothers, fathers and grandfathers, sisters and brothers, aunts and uncles, and neighbors and faith leaders and everybody who believes that children have a right to grow up safely stand up together and make a mighty ruckus as long as necessary to break the gun lobby's veto on common sense gun policy. Our laws and not the NRA must control who can obtain firearms.

It is way past time to demand enactment of federal gun safety measures, including:

- Ending the gun show loophole that allows private dealers to sell guns without a license and avoid required background checks;
- Reinstating the assault weapons ban that expired in 2004;
- And requiring consumer safety standards for all guns.

Why in the world do we regulate teddy bears and toy guns and not real guns that have snuffed out tens of thousands of child lives? Why are leaders capitulating to the powerful gun lobby over the rights of children and all people to life and safety?

I hope these shocking Connecticut child sacrifices in this holy season will force enough of us at last to stand up, speak out, and organize with urgency and persistence until the President, Members of Congress, Governors and State Legislators put child safety ahead of political expediency. And we must aspire and act together to become the world leader in protecting children against gun violence rather than leading the world in child victims of guns. Every child's life is sacred and it is long past time that we protect all our children.

Albert Camus, Nobel Laureate, speaking at a Dominican monastery in 1948 said: "Perhaps we cannot prevent this world from being a world in which children are tortured. But we can reduce the number of tortured children." He described our responsibility as human beings "if not to reduce evil, at least not to add to it" and "to refuse to consent to conditions which torture innocents." It is time for a critical mass of Americans to refuse to consent to the killing of children by gun violence.

Questions for Discussion:

- Mrs. Edelman writes, "Every child's life is sacred and it is long past time that we protect all our children." What sacred texts and teachings inform your understanding of the value of every child and our responsibilities to protect children? Where do you see us succeeding and where do you see us falling short in valuing all children and protecting all children? How could our sacred texts and teaches fuel and guide our efforts to better protect children?

- Do you agree with the statement by Albert Camus? Why or why not? What would it look like for us as individuals and as a faith community to “refuse to consent to conditions which torture innocents”? What actions should we take as individuals or as a community?
- Mrs. Edelman notes that the equivalent of 108 classrooms of 25 children are killed in a single year. That routine slaughter of children does not generate the level of attention that the tragedy of the Newtown massacre did—the ages of the children, the serene setting, the suddenness, and the scale understandably transfixed the public with horror. How can we bring attention, concern, and action to bear on the daily gun deaths as well?

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“The Right to Bear Dreams”: It’s Time to End the Nightmare of Child Gun Deaths

The Rev. Shannon Daley-Harris, Religious Affairs Director, The Children’s Defense Fund

“What about our right to bear dreams?” That was the question my nine-year-old niece asked in the wake of the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School as she tried to understand the NRA’s devotion to the Second Amendment right to bear arms. She had shed tears, felt terror, and now was trying to make sense of the senseless.

What about children’s right to bear dreams? What happens to that right, and the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, when gun violence, poverty, child abuse, lack of health care and mental health care take a daily toll?

Part of the shock of the Sandy Hook slaughter was the setting—it was a community that fully expected its children to have and achieve their dreams. In other communities, dreams were long ago surrendered to daily, living nightmares.

A close friend recounted a conversation between a pastor and three young boys. The pastor was talking with the boys about what they wanted to be when they grew up. The first said he wanted to be a superhero. The second said he wanted to work at McDonalds. The third child picked up a stick and in the dusty ground drew a picture of himself lying on the ground; he said, “I’ll be dead before I grow up.” What happened to our children’s right to bear dreams?

Whether we are parents who previously thought our children were insulated from horror or those who long ago surrendered dreams to grim reality, the massacre on December 14th was a wake-up call and we cannot afford to go back to sleep.

When did we as a nation allow the right to bear arms to supersede children’s right to bear dreams? There are more gun dealers in our nation than there are houses of worship. When did the hunger for weapons outstrip our hunger to glimpse God’s dream for us as a people?

God’s dream for us was captured by the prophet Isaiah:

¹⁷ For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.

¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.

¹⁹ I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,
or the cry of distress.

²⁰ No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days,
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.

²¹ They shall build houses and inhabit them;

they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

²² They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat;
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

²³ They shall not labor in vain,
or bear children for calamity;
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—
and their descendants as well.

²⁴ Before they call I will answer,
while they are yet speaking I will hear.

²⁵ The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!
They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain, says the Lord,

How did we so utterly fail to be partners in God's glorious new creation? After a calamity like the massacre of children in Sandy Hook Elementary School, after the daily calamity of more than seven gun deaths of children and youths, surely we as people of faith recognize that children's right to bear dreams, and our determination to realize God's dream for us, is more important than the right to bear arms. God's dream as found in Isaiah speaks of economic well-being, but more than 16 million children live in poverty in our rich nation. It is a dream in which infants don't die, but every day 80 babies die before their first birthday. It is a dream in which children will not be born for calamity, yet every day in our nation five children are killed by abuse or neglect, five children or teens commit suicide, and more than seven children or teens die from guns. Isn't it time, finally, to work together to realize God's dream for us?

When the NRA finally made a statement, a week after the shooting, the pronouncement was made as if they still called the shots—literally and figuratively. Do they think we as a nation can be lulled back to sleep, guns cradled in our arms? Charlton Heston infamously said anyone wanting to take away his gun would have to pry it from his "cold, dead hands." The thing is, it's not mostly movie stars but children whose hands are cold and dead, cut down by the guns to which the NRA demands such unfettered rights. A child or youth is killed by guns every three hours and fifteen minutes in our gun-crazy nation. That is a nightmare.

Some years ago, the teens of a small church in a poverty-stricken and violence riddled community outside Boston planned the Christmas pageant. The volunteer pageant director invited the youths to engage with the story and reimagine its meaning in their lives, in this day. Come Christmas Eve, as the pageant unfolded the congregation craned forward to see what the "wise men" were bearing to lay down before the Christ child. What they carried and set down were replicas of the real weapons that had taken so many young lives of neighbors and classmates. The teens could think of no better gift to offer the Prince of Peace than the laying down of weapons—something they longed for all in the community to do.

Isaiah prophesied that a little child would lead us. They are trying. Will we follow?

Questions for Discussion:

- What do you believe is God's vision for us and our world? What sacred texts or teachings shape your understanding of how we are to live in community and care for children?
- What parts of the vision in Isaiah are most powerful for you? What aspects of that vision do you feel like we as a people can be working toward right now?
- What are your dreams for our children?
- How do you see children's capacity to dream and achieve their dreams being affected by violence? What other factors do you see impacting children's capacity to dream and achieve those dreams?
- How do we support and follow children's leadership?
- What can we do as individuals and as a place of worship to fulfill God's vision for us and our children?