

And Now Las Vegas: Manhood, Guns, and Violence

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I wrote the original version of this post a few weeks after the mass murder of children and teachers in Newtown, Connecticut. Then, as now, in the aftermath of Sunday's carnage in Las Vegas, I watch news outlets rush to gather facts about the shooter that might help us understand what he did—his age, religion, affiliations, politics, place of birth, marital and parental status, occupation, and, of course, his psychology, thoughts and feelings that might prompt such atrocity.

Anything but the one thing he shares with almost every other mass murderer in our history, from Sand Creek and Wounded Knee to Mi Lai to Orlando and now Las Vegas: the fact of being male.

Five years ago, in the aftermath of mass murder in a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, I watched the PBS *Newshour* display photographs of the four most recent shooters as the moderator posed to a team of experts the question of what the perpetrators all had in common. They looked at the photos and shook their heads. "Nothing," they said, going on to explain that there were no significant overlaps in the men's psychological profiles. All men, with nothing in common.

I watched again after the massacre in Newtown as a PBS moderator expressed her exasperation at the steady stream of killings that seem to defy explanation, adding to her earnest question, *Why is this happening?* what seemed almost an afterthought—that all of the shooters are young men and might this hold a clue? The expert replied as if he hadn't heard, and she did not bring it up again.

I pick on PBS only because they are so enlightened and serious compared with all the rest, and if they can't see what's right in front of them, then I don't know who among the media can.

But, of course, the thing is, they do. I used to think they couldn't on account of ignorance—fish not noticing the water because it's everywhere. I don't believe that anymore. They have eyes that see and they're not stupid. We know this because if you point out to them that all the shooters are male, they will not say, "They *are*?" They know what they're looking at and, even more, some of them feel moved to ask about it. So why, then, do they—and just about everyone else of consequence, it seems—act as if they don't, as if the question isn't worth the asking, much less a serious reply?

Many are in a state of denial or the wilful ignorance that Martin Luther King saw as the greatest threat. But denial and wilful ignorance are used for self-protection, which raises the question of what could frighten into silence these educated, sensitive shapers of public policy and opinion.

The most immediate reason not to ask about the connection between men and violence is, quite simply, that men won't like it if you do. We are a nation tiptoeing around men's anger, men's ridicule, men's potential to withhold resources (such as funding for battered women's shelters and sexual assault programs), men's potential for retaliation, violent and otherwise, men's defensiveness, and the possibility that men might feel upset or attacked or called out or put upon or made to feel vulnerable or even just sad. In other words, anything that might make them feel uncomfortable *as men*.

I have seen this again and again over decades of work on the issue of men's violence. Whether testifying before a governor's commission or serving on the board of a statewide coalition against domestic violence or consulting with a commissioner of public health, when I point out that since most perpetrators of violence are men, they must be included in naming the problem—as in *men's* violence against women—the response has been the same: *We can't do that. Men will get upset. They'll think you're talking about them.*

Even when children are gunned down at school—shot multiple times at close range so as to be rendered unrecognizable to their own parents—people in positions of influence and power show themselves all too willing to look into the camera and act as though they cannot see and do not know.

As a result, when men engage in mass murder, the national focus is on the murder but not on men, beginning with a nationwide outpouring of broken hearts and horror and disbelief that this has happened yet again, all of it undoubtedly heartfelt and sincere, but giving way all too quickly to this country's endless debate about controlling guns. Yes, we must talk about guns because they do kill people in spite of what their defenders say. Killing someone (including yourself) with a gun is far easier and quicker (harder to change your mind) and more certain and therefore more likely than is killing someone with a baseball bat or a knife. The rest of the industrialized world shows clearly how limiting access to guns lowers rates of murder and suicide. And we must talk about violence in the culture, from movies to video games. Even the National Rifle Association wants to talk about that.

But those debates are endless precisely because they so effectively distract from what just about everyone works so hard to ignore, which is the obvious connection between men and guns and violence. It is much easier to argue about immigration or the best way to fight terrorism or the fine points of the First and Second Amendments than it is to take seriously the question of what is going on in all of this *with men*. It is a way to avoid talking about the underlying reality driving it all, which, strangely enough, isn't strictly about guns or politics or even violence. Or even, in a way, just about men.

Guns and violence are not ends in themselves. People are not attached to guns *because* of guns. Nor is violence glorified for itself. Guns and violence are used for something, a means to an end, and it is from this that they acquire their meaning and value in the culture. It is that end that we must understand.

Guns and violence are instruments of control, whether used by states or individuals. They otherwise have no intrinsic value of their own. Their value comes from the simple fact that violence works as a means to intimidate, dominate, and control. It works for governments and hunters and police and terrorists and batterers and parents and schoolyard bullies and corporations and, by extension, anyone who wants to feel larger and more powerful and in control than they otherwise would. The gun has long been valued in this culture as the ultimate tool in the enforcement of control and domination, trumping all else in the assertion of personal control over others. Can anyone forget the scene in the film, *Raiders of the Lost Arc*, when Indiana Jones, 'our hero,' is confronted with the huge man wielding an equally enormous sword, and the white man unholsters his gun and the crowd roars its approval as he calmly shoots the other man down?

The gun is the great equalizer with the potential to elevate even the most weak, shy, or timid above anyone who lacks equivalent firepower. What this makes clear is that violence in this country is not an aberration or a simple product of mental illness. It is an integral part of the American story and the American way of life.

The key to understanding gun violence and the fact that all these shooters are men is this: an obsession with control forms the core of our cultural definition of manhood, which is to say, what it takes to qualify as a real man. Because violence is the ultimate and most extreme instrument of control, then the potential for violence—whether or not individual men make use of it—is also central to the cultural definition of manhood.

Every man and boy faces the challenge of signaling either their own capacity for violence or their support if not admiration for that potential in other males, if for no other reason than to solidify their claim to manhood, if not to deter acts of violence and ridicule directed at them. It is a dynamic that begins early—in locker rooms and schoolyards—and extends in one form or another throughout men's lives. However men and boys choose to deal with it as individuals, deal with it they must.

No one, no matter how powerful, is immune to the cultural imperatives of manhood. Every Presidential candidate must first and foremost demonstrate their qualifications to be the nation's Commander-in-Chief, which is to say, their willingness and readiness to make use of and direct the U.S. military's massive capacity for violence in the overriding interest of controlling what happens in other countries. The record is clear, for example, that Lyndon Johnson kept us in the Vietnam War long after he knew it was unwinnable, for the pathetically simple reason that he was afraid of being seen as a President who could not control the outcome of that war. The horrific cost of protecting his manhood and the nation's identification with it was not enough to keep him from it. The choices he made have been repeated by every President since, with the electorate's enthusiastic support, right down to the

present day where drone strikes routinely take the lives of innocent women, children, and men who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, including weddings, family gatherings, and schools.

Men's acceptance of the cultural association of manhood with control makes them complicit in its consequences, including the use of violence. Acceptance need not be conscious or intentional. Individual men need not be violent themselves. Mere silence—the voice of complicity—is enough to accomplish the effect, and to connect them to the violence that other men do. When a man who is feeling wronged or insecure in his manhood straps on body armor and takes up a gun, he is pursuing by extreme means a manhood ideal of control and domination that has wide and deep support in this society, including among men who would never dream of doing such a thing themselves. That our culture is saturated with images of violence—from television and video games to the football field—is not the work of a lunatic fringe of violent men. Nor is the epidemic of actual violence. All of it flows from an obsession with control that shapes every man's standing as a real man in this society.

It would be a mistake to end the analysis here, as if the problem of violence was simply a matter of men and manhood. The Newtown murderer, after all, used weapons belonging to his mother, which she had taught him how to use. She would not be the first woman attracted to guns because they made her feel powerful and in control. It might seem that this would nullify the argument about manhood, control, and violence. But, in fact, the involvement of women merely extends the argument to a larger level. The argument, after all, is not that men's violence is caused by something inherently wrong with men, but that such behavior is shaped and promoted by a social environment that includes women.

A patriarchal society—which is what we've got—is, among other things, male-identified, which means that men and manhood are culturally identified as the standard for human beings in general. Consider, for example, the routine use of 'guys' to refer to both men and women even though the word clearly and unambiguously points to men (if you doubt this, ask people to raise their hand if they're a guy and see how many women you get). Or that for years, medical research on heart disease focused only on men, based on the (false) assumption that the male body could serve as the universal standard for the human being.

In a male-identified world, what works for men, what is valued by men, is generally assumed to work for and be valued by human beings in general. So if the obsession with control associated with manhood includes defining power and safety in terms of domination and control and, therefore, the capacity for violence that comes with owning a gun, then this is seen as not merely manly, but as universally human. Cultural ideas that would preclude women being both feminine and interested in guns have been a device for excluding and marginalizing women and keeping them dependent on men for protection (from other men). As such limitations have been broken down by the women's movement, it is inevitable that some women will adopt male-identified ideals about power and control as their own.

But the analysis of violence rooted in an obsession with control must go farther still, beyond issues of gender, because the obsession shapes every social institution, from economics and politics to education, religion, and healthcare. Our entire history has been inseparable from a continuing story of control and domination directed at the earth and nonhuman species, at Native Americans, at enslaved Africans and other people of color, at those who resist the building of the American empire and its exercise of global power, at workers, at immigrants. As Richard Slotkin argues in his brilliant history of the making of the American mythology, violence has played a central role in that history. Although the heroes of that mythology have always been men, the larger idea of America shaped by it—of American exceptionalism and superiority, and freedom as the right to dominate and act without restraint—is about more than manhood. It has become the heart of who we think we are as a society and a people.

Which may be why there is so much ambivalence about guns and violence, and such a narrow focus on the disturbed individual and not what this is really about, which is ourselves and an entire worldview that informs our lives, with cultural ideals about manhood at the center. The national silence about manhood and violence is about much more than either. It is about protecting a way of life even if it means failing to protect our children or people gathered in prayer in church or crowds turned out to listen to music.

Any society organized in this way is a frightening place to be—people afraid to go to the movies unless they're

packing heat, parents afraid to send their kids to school. And the solution offered by that same society is, of course, still more control. If someone has a gun, get your own. Arm the teachers. Arm yourself. Arm your kids.

But every crisis is also an opportunity. Here we are once again. The prohibition against talking about violence and manhood in the same breath puts us in a state of paralysis which is where we find ourselves today. And that is where we will be when this happens again, as it is all but certain to do if it hasn't already.

Unless we do something to break the silence. History is full of examples of the power of ordinary citizens speaking out—on slavery and race; on the rights of working people, gays, immigrants, Native Americans, people with disabilities, and women; on the exploitation and abuse of children; on the degradation, exploitation, and destruction of the earth and its species; on capitalism and the power of wealth. We have done it before and we can do it again.

This is the third time I have posted this—after Newtown, and then Orlando, and now Las Vegas. I have no doubt that if we do not effectively confront the violent reality of manhood, I will have occasion to post it again.

For an explanation of patriarchy and how it works, see Allan G. Johnson, [*The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy, 3rd edition, 2014.*](#)

Richard Slotkin's trilogy about the origins of American mythology: *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*; *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890*; and *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*.

For Lyndon Johnson as president during the Vietnam War, see Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*.