

The middle ground

One woman's fear of guns leads her to pursue understanding between the politically charged extremes

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When it comes to guns, there is a deep urban-rural chasm in Oregon, each side caricaturing the other. On the urban side, there are the liberal Portlanders who could not point to Douglas County on a map, and think that Oregon's four corners are Astoria, Hood River, Bend and Newport; on the rural side, the angry, right-wing, sign-wavers of Roseburg who loudly and crudely denounced President Obama when he arrived to pay his respects quietly to the victims of the Umpqua Community College shootings last October.

But I believe that in every Oregon county and city, there are men and women across the political spectrum who have guns in their closets and garages, which they pack safely out into the woods and fields in season, to hunt for duck and pheasant, deer and elk, and that they are reasonable, kind, non-violent people who do not necessarily agree with the extreme rants of Wayne LaPierre, the executive director of the National Rifle Association.

I write not as a gun owner or a hunter; I am quite the opposite. I am afraid of guns, and repelled by them, and the unending gun violence in the United States. I've never owned a gun, and can count on one

hand the people I know who do. My father grew up in Wyoming and learned very young, when taken antelope hunting by my grandfather, that he had no heart for killing game animals. When I was growing up, we had my grandfather's old .22 up in the attic with the luggage and camping gear and my father let us shoot tin cans off fences out in the sticks when we were kids. But that was all: guns were for shooting cans, and hunting was for other people. I come at this with neither a love for hunting nor the killing power of guns, but only a desire to understand the wide range of opinion that surrounds guns and gun culture.

We can wish for laws such as those in England, which regulate private ownership of guns very strictly. We can point to examples such as Australia, where gun control has made a positive difference in murder rates. There is progress, even here, in increments, state by state, with new background check laws and safety requirements. But it seems unlikely that there is much hope for real change without the perspective and support of people who do own guns and use them.

This is not England or Australia or China, and the American belief in defending yourself and your property at the point of a gun runs deep in many parts of the country. Fearful anti-gun editorials often state, hopelessly, that we are awash in guns, and that all the background checks in the world cannot help.

And in small-town gun stores, people lean on the counters and talk about how Obama is going to take their guns away. Somewhere between these two poles of

fear and suspicion, there must a reasonable middle ground, where understanding can emerge.

In the early winter of 2016, a group of right-wing, gun-carrying extremists with an interesting mélange of beliefs – spanning fundamentalist Mormonism, a peculiar reading of the Constitution and deep hatred of the federal government – took over the Malheur Wildlife Refuge in southeast Oregon, appointing themselves as the defenders of a family of ranchers in serious conflict with the Bureau of Land Management. Throughout the interminable reporting on this crisis and its affect on Harney County, there were quiet, sensible people who never revealed their own politics but advocated for peace and non-violence. One of these was Dave Ward, the sheriff of Harney County, who spoke with the armed occupiers and calmed the townspeople. He stood his ground to keep the peace, not to side with anyone except the people who depended on him to protect their remote corner of the state. His neutrality and old-fashioned courtesy took the wind out of the fanatics' sails and gave me hope.

We can find this kind of civility and restraint everywhere, though we must listen closely.

I spoke to my friend Dave Strahan, who has stayed in our hometown of Grants Pass in southern Oregon and who has hunted and fished in its rivers and woods for decades. He sells sporting goods, driving to stores throughout Klamath, Jackson, Josephine and Douglas counties. I asked him about his thoughts on reasonable gun

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The Revolutions of the Heart series originates from a workshop taught by Martha Gies, whose students are profiling people in the community who inspire us. The title comes from Dorothy Day: "The greatest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us." (Loaves and Fishes: The Inspiring Story of the Catholic Worker Movement)