

The New York Times

The Opinion Pages

You searched for *by john lennon*

1 Results

Dec 14, 2:03 pm 265

## A Perspective on Guns, Murder, Suicide from Attica

By JOHN LENNON

 (This essay accompanies Nicholas Kristof's Sunday column on guns in America; please comment below on either the Kristof column or this essay by Lennon)

When I was in the seventh grade my mother told me my father died. First she said it was a heart attack. I learned later he'd blown his head off with a shotgun. Even though I never knew my father (he'd left when I was 12 months old) his suicide affected me in the coming years. He must have been deeply flawed to have done that, which meant I was too, I thought.

When I was 24 I killed an associate with an assault rifle. Between my father's suicide with a gun, and committing murder with a gun, I'm part of America's ugly phenomenon: Upwards of 20,000 people commit suicide with a gun and 11,000 are murdered with a gun annually — yet many dismiss guns as the problem. I do take responsibility for the murder; I'm sorry for taking his life, and all the life he could have had but without a gun I would not have killed... a bold claim that screams rationalization, I know. But God knows I believe this to be

true.

If I didn't have that perfect killing machine I would have had to earn the kill — like a seasoned bow hunter I'd have to hit him just right leaving no room for error. Could I have stabbed him? Strangled him? Bludgeoned him? If I had done so and he hadn't died, why would that have made me less culpable than I am now, a man who swiftly and cowardly shot another man to death? A killer nonetheless, I hash these things out, in my head, in my cell, in Attica serving 28 years to life.

He sneaked upon me in the prison yard like I sneaked upon his friend in a Brooklyn street. When I turned, I saw his arm swing for my neck. I weaved. Then I felt the piercing blows, as he gripped my shirt and dug into my side. Pressured by the blood-thirsty crowd, he stabbed me six times because I shot his friend to death. The ice pick didn't do the job, though. He got away with it because we were in a blind spot of the yard, and I never told on him. Prison ethics. While my assailant's intent was clear, the weapon he had access to was insufficient. Therefore I lived.

The mantra "guns don't kill people, people kill people" reverberates throughout our society. How about "people kill less people without guns?" It's clear that the only reason I'm alive is because my assailant didn't have his weapon of choice. Can you imagine if we had access to guns in prison?

I may have succumbed to suicide if I had a gun in prison. Hanging myself seemed grim, it would entail suffocating which reminded me of bad dreams about drowning. To hang until death you have to be dead set on suicide. Where the pain of life shadows the pain you will experience strangling yourself to death. It's chilling.

Yet men amongst me have hanged themselves. I remember the last lifeless body that wheeled past my cell on a gurney, we shared the same first name, same murder conviction, same life sentence, and both hailed from Brooklyn. I was confounded by his last conversation, which seemed upbeat. By the obscure

comma splice?

↑ fragment OK, I suppose.

splice - do they do that because NYT?

another long fragment. It works, though.  
banging noise I heard only moments before... only to realize that the noise was his feet flailing against the cell wall, instinctively fighting for a life he no longer wanted.

Though I didn't care too much about my life - or else I wouldn't have taken someone else's - I wasn't determined to kill myself. At least not like that. I was determined, however, to get high and not feel. And if I faded out on a good batch of prison smack - heroin - then... oh well. Yet when withdrawing from the drugs I found myself down in the depths of depression, like my father whipped from alcoholism, and at that point I too could have impulsively blown my head off. To some extent I'm glad I was sent to an environment without guns - because I was able to survive suicide and murder. In so-called free society, revenge for the man I killed probably would have unfolded with a shot to my head.

Perhaps a gun doesn't entice ones appetite for murder (it did mine though) or suicide. But it is the perfect tool to carry out the act when the thought arises. Many murders and suicides would be fleeting thoughts if guns weren't so ubiquitous.

As our country remains incredibly polarized by this his debate, a Machiavellian gun sector sits off to the side enjoying record earnings. I'm all for the market system, but when the products are killing machines, why shouldn't we tighten measures to keep guns out of the hands of people like me? I suggested a few simple laws that could affect criminal behavior, in my article at the Atlantic online. But Washington does nothing.

Truly I'm blown away. Is the status quo really okay? Until we relinquish our apathy I suppose we'll keep pretending this is the greatest nation on earth as we parade through life to the relentless drumbeat of death.