

Guns Affect How We Relate To Each Other

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Years ago, another term for a gun was the “equalizer.” In situations where adversaries were about to settle arguments by physical force, it was often the case that a smaller weaker adversary was at a considerable disadvantage. If he carried a gun, his weapon worked as an equalizer to make the confrontation more nearly equal. Carrying a gun was thought to be an equalizer even when the opponent might also have a gun because physical disparities did not matter so much if the argument escalated into a gun fight.

Today, if I were having an argument with another person and both felt we had something important to win or lose, the conversation would change a great deal depending upon whether either of us carried a gun. The dispute might be over a property fence line or an automobile infraction, or over money that one person owed to the other. In any case, the situation would be serious enough that both participants felt the outcome was of some considerable importance to them.

In my case, if I didn’t have a gun, but I knew my adversary did, I would choose my words very carefully. In this situation, my only chance of “winning” would depend upon being as rational as possible. I would try to be convincing and polite and reasonable. Without a gun, this approach would be my only weapon. I would avoid threats or insults or attempts at intimidation. My adversary, in possession of a gun, however, could afford to be a bit more intimidating, perhaps belligerent, and even strident in his approach. He would put his points across with increased bravado, bolstered by the added conviction that “might makes right.”

Reasonable and thoughtful people know that ethically, physical power, or might, has little to do with moral correctness or justice. Ethically speaking, decisions depend upon fairness, telling the truth, and sharing ideas that lead to fair solutions acceptable to both parties. In a dispute, ideally, the language of ethics

includes respect for the other person, negotiations, compromise and understanding the laws of the country. Justice demands reasonable evidence that is accurate and appropriately related to the argument at hand. In the end, all of these ethical methods may sound too ideal, but they are, in fact “practical” approaches because they work best in the settlement of most disputes, most of the time. They also avoid bloodshed, injury, unfairness, illegal actions and occasionally, even murder.

So why don't people resort to ethics rather than raw power? There are often other factors that emerge to confound reasonable moral solutions. In countries where the possession of guns is deemed a “right” which is backed up by constitutional law, it is not surprising that there is some confusion about guns and their role in justice. If we add some consumption of alcohol and a bit of testosterone to an already emotionally charged dispute, things can go wrong very quickly. Add to this mix, the fact that in the same country there is approximately one gun for each citizen. So guns are readily available. Further, if there are some remaining vestiges of a history of racial separation, this too, may be a complicating factor. Add to this the assumed authority that customarily goes with the possession of a gun, whether legal or illegal. Add also the fact that there are many cities with huge populations in which people, by necessity, intermix closely with each other.

Some of the above may explain many of the misuses of gun power in settling disputes. Still, it does not explain why Canadians also have our share of murders and shootings in our own country.

In Canada, when there are gun offenses, they often involve young men, either as victims or perpetrators. As parents and teachers, we should teach children the benefits of compromise and negotiation. This would be a more valuable lesson than a father introducing his twelve-year-old into early adulthood by instructions on how to shoot a gun. Children should be shown that sharing and fairness are a big part of avoiding conflict. The earlier children can take this civilized approach the better. In this case, the ethics of good ideals are more “practical” than the alternative of force and coercion.