

THE RIGHT TO NOT BEAR ARMS

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My death is not only inevitable, it is also imminent.

No, I have neither been diagnosed with a lethal ailment and given minutes to live, nor am I contemplating suicide once I am done putting this down. I merely mean that my life is a mere flash in the two million or so years in which humanity has walked the earth.

Seen in the perspective of that time frame, the end of my life is, in fact, coming very soon -- whenever in my life it may choose to arrive. I might as well accept it.

I think about that whenever the topic of gun control comes up... especially when a Czar of American Letters™ like David Mamet picks up the quill to write a barn-burning opinion piece (like that on the cover of this week's *Newsweek*) in which he insists that the right to bear arms is an essential component to society; both in that it insures protection against the corrupt depredations of an increasingly intrusive government, as well as in that it is an essential prophylactic against incivility. In Mamet's philosophy, no one dares to be an aggressor in a society in which every man, woman, and child is given the inalienable right to carry guns.

In short: mutually assured destruction is the best insurance of our right to life. In the macro: should the government overstep, an armed populace will rise to pull it down. In the micro: if you kill, you will be killed.

Mamet's argument is lucid, consistent, and takes its cues from his -- and many other intelligent people's -- interpretation of the frame of reference and aims of the Founding Fathers. It does not surprise me that many whom I consider to be level-headed intellects feel as Mamet does: that an individual is the best and only person to decide how to defend themselves, and that, in this world, an individual can only properly accomplish that goal in possession of a firearm.

Still...reading Mamet's piece, I could not help but be struck by the preening, hypermasculine worship of conflict implicit in his every sentence. The bedrock conviction that the natural state of humanity is ideological crisis which will erupt into violence at any moment is implicit in his thesis, as well as his beliefs about the role of government, and the individual, in society.

I suppose this should not come as a surprise from Mamet. His work, from the sacred *Glengarry Glen Ross*, to the profane -- his martial arts film *Redbelt* and his television series *The Unit* -- range from what is essentially a Valentine to the poetry of emotional abuse to sustained explorations of the ability to enforce one's mark in combat against aggressors in a world that is viciously opposed to mutual understanding.

To live in the world expressed by Mamet -- and, to some degree, to live in the world of most who believe in the socially sanctioned ability to take a life when necessary -- is to live in (to borrow and recontextualize a phrase from Carl Sagan) a "demon-haunted world." It is a prison: a maze in which predators lurk behind every corner and meanness of the soul is either prime motivator or inevitable outcome.

The Founding Fathers must have believed in this world, being as they flagged the right to bear arms in a language as carefully considered as the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness... and, again, it makes situational sense: they had been oppressed by a totalitarian monarchy and were surrounded by natives who were -- understandably -- hostile to their genocidal designs on their ancestral homeland.

All of which raises the more important question: when does humanity evolve from the right to bear arms to the right not to?

The study of violence in television -- a topic concomitant with issues relating to guns -- has yielded a phrase which has bounced in my head since I first encountered it: "mean world syndrome." The concept is simple: the depiction of violence in popular culture may or may not incite actual violence, but it almost certainly creates the indelible -- and vastly exaggerated -- impression in viewers that the world is a nasty, brutish place in which violence is not only an acceptable means by which to resolve conflict, but also a complete inevitability.

The belief in a mean world may be profitable for gun manufacturers, but I believe it is a cancer of the soul and an impediment to evolution.

Evolution is a difficult proposition, just as "Thou shalt not kill" is a difficult admonition to follow -- especially when others want what you have and have no moral barriers to its acquisition. It is harder to reason than to kill, it is harder to compromise than to kill, it is harder to exercise empathy than to kill, it is harder to persuade, to forgive, to make a fearless moral inventory of our own wrongs, and to leave others to do the same and see the error of their own ways, than to kill.

It is -- admittedly -- harder to accomplish pretty much anything without the threat of a reckoning than it is to swing a big stick; and yet, over and over, since the evolution of consciousness, the prohibition of murder continues to be the central tenet of human spiritual and ethical growth. I believe this to be an evolutionary adaptation -- a call across the eons telling us that the next step in our development as a species is collaboration and nonviolence.

In spiritual terms, the hard simplicity of the statement "Thou shalt not kill" makes its challenge frighteningly clear. It does not say, "Thou shalt not kill save for cases of home invasion" or "Thou shalt not kill except for when your way of life is being threatened by a formerly democratic government that has really gotten way too autocratic for its britches" and it sure as shekels doesn't say, "Thou shalt not kill save for in the case of an organized state militia."

For all the embellishments that human beings put in their spiritual traditions -- usually designed to tell others how to live their lives in stultifying, homogeneous obedience and keep out undesirables -- it is surprising how often the prohibition of murder shows up. The seeds of virtue are programmed to survive the death of the individual: "Thou shalt not kill" -- in all of its forms, across secular and spiritual thought -- keeps outliving people, democracies and dictatorships.

That is evolution at work.

Evolution is difficult and inconvenient to expediency. However, as I have been blessed with the luxury of living in what is -- arguably -- a democracy in which my participation is still

allowed, of the opportunity to make a living in my chosen field, of a surfeit of creature comforts and technological expediency, of a preponderance of like-minded individuals who share my faith in God and my reliance on a number of societal systems designed to further my way of life -- usually at the expense of others -- I believe that I have a duty to make my life difficult in, at the very least, some minuscule but relevant way.

Chris Hedges famously titled one of his books *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. His argument is that both the perception and reality of never-ending battle instills in human beings a sense of purpose. As long as there is someone or something to oppose, the soul is filled with the comforting tonic of simplicity: don't worry about empathy, reason, the truth that all humans are genetically identical, or the underlying unity of world religion and ethics, shoot to kill. Indulge your need for violent conquest and all the fuss and muss of worldly life becomes a distant memory. There's an addictive satisfaction and perverse joy in that clarity.

The bearing of arms, and the perception of it as a right is -- to me -- a vestige of a primal addiction to violence, and the anodyne ease of a life led in Manichean opposition: an expression of the spirit-destroying contradiction that to be alive and free is to be on constant alert for coming war. To be armed is to never lose sight of the possibility that at any time we may be called upon to reassert our triumphant masculinity through the application of lethal force.

I believe that finding a way of life that does not automatically see in strangers the threat of extinction -- that takes kindness, tolerance and collaboration as the first assumption of human coexistence -- is both a Christian and Darwinian ideal: a natural continuation of the rise of consciousness. I refuse to be a walking deterrent -- just as I refuse to be a talking inciter -- of violence.

I believe that there is an evolutionary imperative -- expressed across a majority of spiritual and secular traditions -- for the prohibition of murder under any circumstance. I aspire to live in a society where fear of the other is not understood as the baseline, and feel duty-bound to that aspiration because the accident of my birth in the wealthiest and freest nation on the planet affords me the privilege to strive for that ideal.

I believe that the responsibility that accompanies the largely unearned rewards of my privilege -- and that of almost every other American -- is the exploration of a way of life in which that bounty is no longer earned through violence or exploitation.

I have made peace with the inevitability of my own death. Statistically, the greatest likelihood is that the end of my life will come as a result of heart disease brought about by the excessive consumption of processed foods.

Even in our gun-loving, violence-obsessed, perpetually-in-Defcon-1 United States of America, the possibility of my dying as a result of a violent incident involving firearms -- even one involving terrorists carrying firearms -- is lower than an automobile accident, plane crash, or lightning strike. So I will not carry a gun in expectation of the one-man war that my very way of life has already conspired to prevent.

I will use my freedom to employ words, actions, and ideas to convince others that to strap on a cold reminder of the ability to take life is not a freeing act, but a bondage to a way of life that must be stopped...

And if I'm shot by a terrorist, or a jackbooted foot-soldier of a totalitarian regime -- or even a common criminal?

Forgive them.

Or don't. I won't care. I'll be dead... and the life of my killers, and whatever they stood for that was so important that it required my extinction, will end just as quickly, cosmically speaking, as mine.

I refuse my right to bear arms because I prefer to advocate for my right not to.

I refuse my right to bear arms because I believe that to be the truest expression of the privilege for which so many have killed and died.

I refuse my right to bear arms because I believe that Gandhi, Einstein, Sagan, Jesus, Buddha -- and even Ayn Rand, whose words I'll quote as a credibility-destroying concession to a young adulthood misspent re-reading *Atlas Shrugged* -- agreed on one thing:

"Force and mind are opposites; morality ends where a gun begins."