

## What a Difference a Year Doesn't Make

Margaret Hawkins

One year ago, a young man climbed onto a rooftop in the town where I live and shot 82 rounds into a crowd that had gathered to watch the Fourth of July parade. Seven people died. Forty-eight were injured. A child was paralyzed. The military-style attack took one minute.

The story became national news, partly for the ironic confluence of the crime and the holiday. People were there to celebrate freedom. Instead, they fled and hid. Parents threw their bodies over their children's to save their lives. Afterward, parade-goers described the exact moment they realized the music had stopped and that what they had thought were marching-band drumbeats were actually the sound of automatic gunfire.

An even more bitter irony is this: Only days before, President Biden had signed into law a bipartisan bill intended to prevent dangerous people from acquiring firearms. The legislation, which also included increased investment in our shaky mental health system, ended nearly thirty years of gridlock in Washington over how to address escalating gun violence in the United States. This was progress, but with a terrible omission. The crucial part of the bill banning assault weapons was blocked by Republicans.



Michele Graves, "A Life is A Life" (Colt AR 233), 2019, pig heart encased in resin, canvas with organ tissue and acrylic, 60 x 67 x 4 1/2". Courtesy of Epiphany Center for the Arts, Chicago

Earlier this month my town marked the one-year anniversary of the shooting with a somber ceremony followed by a police-protected walk along the parade route. The event, more Memorial Day than Independence Day, was caring and tasteful. A moment

of silence marked the exact time of the shooting. The names of the dead were read aloud. Speakers then attempted to process the aftermath.



Kindness Rock Garden, Park District of Highland Park Rose Garden, 2022. Courtesy of the Chicago Tribune

Our mayor, Nancy Rottering, who is a class act, spoke first with her usual mix of clarity, intelligence, and what seems to be genuine compassion. The usual pols were there too, front and center — Governor JB Pritzker, Senators Dick Durbin and Tammy Duckworth, Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton. All Democrats, all pro-gun control. Depending on your affiliation, and I heard both sides from neighbors, they were either there to lend moral support or to grandstand for votes. Fortunately, politicking was kept to a minimum and none of them spoke. Instead, a Catholic priest, a Presbyterian minister and a rabbi took turns at the podium. They talked about grief and trauma, resilience and healing, faith.



Lorraine Hansberry was the first African American woman to have a play produced on Broadway, with “A Raisin in the Sun.” Courtesy of the New York Times. Photo: David Attie

The town’s poet laureate read a poem, the town’s librarian sang the national anthem, the town’s string quartet cast a spell. Kindness rocks painted by local children were given away to be placed in a garden that will serve as a memorial until something more

permanent is erected. Volunteers slipped quietly through the crowd handing out water, and when a man fainted from the heat he was gently revived.

The theme of the day was kindness. For an hour those present shared a sense of community, a feeling that we are a like-minded, well-intended people who have suffered an inexplicable blow, but that we will proceed together to bring about change. And we have, to an extent. In January Governor Pritzker signed a bill outlawing assault weapons and high-capacity magazines in Illinois.

And yet. State laws don't really work. If you live in Chicago and you want a military-style weapon, all you have to do is drive to Indiana.

Greed and fear and the mad clinging to a perverted interpretation of the second amendment carry greater weight than preservation of life. So the gun lobby wins and we are bogged down in an endless legal process while Americans continue to die from gun violence at an astounding rate.

Ask yourself, are you surprised anymore to hear of the latest shooting? A shooter has to kill at least three to even make the news. Outrage has faded to stock condolences and battle-weary numbness. At public gatherings it seems perfectly normal to hand over our bags to be searched, happy to prove that we, at least, aren't packing. We choose sturdy shoes in case we'll have to run. The change that should have happened didn't and now we just adapt, trudging forward into a time of lowered expectations.

This bogging down in process and ratcheting down of hope reminds me of a student's response to a question I posed on an exam about Lorraine Hansberry's play, "A Raisin in the Sun." I'd asked if they thought there had been significant progress in race relations in American society since the play's first performance in 1959. The student, who is Black and perhaps 19 years old, answered with the sharp, serene, scoffing confidence that only the young can muster. Progress was a false notion, she wrote. If you call it progress it means the thing still exists. There shouldn't be "progress." Racism should just end. I think about that comment a lot and how it applies to many things. Intentions only go so far.

The New York Times reports that as of this July 4, there were more than 330 mass shootings in the United States. Which is nothing compared to total gun deaths. As horrible as mass shootings are, they represent a small fraction of shooting deaths in our country, over half of which are suicides. The fact is, if you really want to kill somebody in this country, it's easy to get a firearm to do it with.

The horse has left the barn. Or rather, the guns have left the gun shops. At one point we could have made it difficult for people to get guns. Now, it may be too late. Even if we banned gun sales for eternity starting today — dream on, but just suppose — we could never collect the hundreds of millions of privately owned firearms that are already out

there. How could we expect people to give up their guns in the interest of public safety knowing the guy next door might be, probably is, sitting on his own private arsenal?

Might there be an altogether different tack? A way to be, as a nation, that makes people less inclined to want to kill?



Pablo Picasso, "The Old Guitarist,"

1903/04, oil on canvas, 48 x 33". Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago

The memorial ceremony was bracketed by music, beginning with several somber pieces grounded by a mournful cello and ending with a bagpiper playing "Amazing Grace." These performances enveloped the event in art, which may be the very best we can do. The speeches were good but calls to action feel stale by now. What I remember is the consoling music. "Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast." That morning it was

music that cast the protective spell of peace and comfort that words couldn't quite accomplish.

Of course, even music wasn't enough to soothe the savage breast of the shooter, who, according to one report, was a music-obsessed amateur rapper. We'll probably never



President Barack Obama leads the singing of Amazing Grace at funeral of Reverend Clementa Pinckney, Charleston, South Carolina, 2015, still from video. Courtesy of ABC News

know what was in his mind or what made him pick up a gun that morning. But maybe we should try to figure it out. Finding that out may be our only real hope for fixing what's wrong with our country.

