

We Don't Play with Guns
By Cheryl L. Courtney

Our home has guns in it, broken down and locked safely away in the basement gun cabinet. The stern message repeated over and over is, "We don't ever play with guns." I married an outdoorsman from Wyoming; and I grew up exploring the swampy forests of Louisiana with a loaded .410. I love hunting in the Rockies every fall. We eat deer any time we can get it; I am proud of my recipes for venison and elk jambalaya, lasagna or hearty chili.

I married a man with two children. He taught them both to shoot accurately and safely. His daughter achieved an expert marksman rating in her ROTC unit from Casper, WY. When our little girl was born, we knew her skilled father would teach her, also. I hoped that someday she would enjoy elk camp as well. We hunt, and we practice shooting, but we don't play with guns.

This gun thing really is hard on all fronts. Once during months of nursing my demanding colicky daughter, I escaped to hear the marvelous a cappella ensemble, Sweet Honey in the Rock, an amazing group of women specializing in singing African and folksy, soulful, gospel songs. Typically, their concerts rock with clapping and wild energy. This night had been highly charged; the crowd was thrilled. After the intermission, they returned dressed in bold African costumes. They introduced the next number, a Soweto Mother's Birthing Song, in which the mother mourns the blood of her son, a soldier killed in the resistance, running in the red waters of the Soweto river.

As the rich voices launched the first clear compelling notes across a stilled auditorium, a tiny infant wailed from the first row, on cue. That hungry mournful wail scraped across the hearts of every mother or father in the room. On cue, the group stopped singing and the note reverberated as we all listened to the baby cry.

While the young mother worked to hush her child, every parent in the room counted silently the blessings of newborn children.

Months later, I was maneuvering our baby, Laurel, in a shopping cart at a department store when a little boy burst from under the clothing racks pointing a plastic rifle at me. He "shot" me repeatedly, circled and "attacked" my babbling baby girl. Gleefully, he darted away. When he renewed his ambush, I confronted him sternly, with "I don't want you to play like you are shooting at us; I don't like that. We don't play with guns."

His little face fell; he appeared completely confused.

As his mother approached, I gently explained that I did not want him pretending to shoot at me or my little girl. She smiled, and apologized, and led him away, complaining to him aloud that "not every one is comfortable with guns."

Another shock happened at an estate auction sale. My toddler was exploring the box next to me as I was drooling over a stack of vintage quilt blocks. I heard her little voice, "ook, Mommy. I bring this to you!" I turned to her and my heart stopped. She was struggling to lift a long, black handled 38 revolver with both her little hands, swaying back and forth under the weight. Trembling, I disarmed my three year old, saying "Thank you, sweetie. We don't ever play with guns. Mommy needs to take this now."

My husband hurried over at the sight me clutching the weapon. "Hey, there's even a box of ammo' in here!" He exclaimed. I sighed.

I was heavily pregnant with her baby brother when she and I entered a Walk/Run for the Cure in Cheyenne, WY. Waddling around in comfortable walking shoes, I hoped to get her to ride in her jogging stroller. We heard the shot from the starting gun. All the mommies began capturing children; we were to start fifteen minutes later. I spotted Laurel holding the hand of a handsome young man. He was holding a pistol in the other hand. "Honey, we don't play with guns, ...or people who are holding them," I stammered racing over, heart pounding, only to discover that my daughter had introduced her self to a prominent oncology specialist, who had the honor of firing the starter gun.

We moved to the beautiful community of Loveland, CO. I adore the view driving into the city along Lake Loveland, framed by the snow capped peaks of Rocky Mountain National Park and the Mummy Range. Across from the lake is the Duane Webster Veterans Park, adorned with a WWII 105mm Howitzer, a field artillery piece, installed in 1959. Known as the “cannon park,” park mom’s like to gather there because the shaded playground is secured behind a tall fence, safe from the flow of traffic around the lake. My daughter and son love to scramble over the cannon, playfully hanging from its long barrel by their knees.

We don’t play with guns, but we can play on them!

Well, I became uneasy with this especially after Columbine and the other school shootings in Arkansas. I have to admit I selected other parks for play dates for a long time, but the cannon park remains a family favorite.

My generation has their “grassy knoll;” we perk up at the words “book depository” and recall Kent State and the Mi’Lai Massacres. Over these last few years, I have heard phrases like “going postal,” and “9-11” crop up in my children’s vocabulary. In school, they can spell Iraq, and Kuwait, recognizing the names of Saddam Hussein, or Osama Ben-Laden. I read in the newspaper that statistically, one in five school aged children in Los Angeles have lost a friend or family member in a drive by shooting. Recently, a baby was killed sitting in a stroller at the Denver Zoo.

We don’t play with guns, but where can we play? Or work? Or learn?

Family Fourth of July celebrations in Loveland, CO are spent lounging on blankets at the lake edge, watching the city fireworks from the “cannon park.” I will never forget my son, aged five, clinging to the barrel of the beloved cannon asking me, “Mommy, why are there fireworks on the fourth of July? Or BBQ?” As I tried to answer him, reciting from the Star Spangled Banner, “...the rockets red glare. Gave proof through the night, that our flag was still there,” I felt my heart break.

How many mother’s had explained war to their sons, with icy hearts, wondering if this precious little boy will grow up to be a soldier under fire? Would my son’s blood run red in the rivers of a foreign countryside?

Before the Fourth of July festivities of 2006, we watched ESPN footage of missiles fired from North Korea into the Sea of Japan. In sad silence, we walked to the hill with other Loveland families to watch the city fireworks display exploding overhead. I could not help but feel afraid as we stretched blankets out on that grassy knoll. All of the little boys, even my son, pretended to be under enemy fire, chests clutched in dramatic death poses.

No, we don’t play with guns, but my nation endures warfare with guns. We live in a country protected by the rights to bear arms. We enjoy freedom in a country where a child can turn a cottonwood stick into a machine gun, and terrorists successfully convert crowded domestic airliners into fiery bombs. Guns are everywhere in our culture, our history.

We buried my beloved stepfather, Dewey Young ten years ago. His tombstone is marked with the brass WWII medallion provided for his years of military service. My children asked about the twenty one gun salute at his funeral, complete with a formal color guard.

We have to maintain safe places to play, to work and to learn. Freedom is never free. Somebody-- surely, not mine but some other mother’s son-- will have to pick up the guns, man the cannons and go to serve under the flag. I hope we have taught our children to respect all life and handle guns respectfully. Sadly, I have to admit that I also hope my sweet little ones will be able to serve as honorable patriots. This seems to be what the very best Americans do.

Every parent must deal with guns. The reality of gun warfare touches the lives of every child. No, we don’t play with guns, but in truth, we must live ever mindful of them.

I do.

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