

## To counteract avoidable deaths: A spiritual awakening

by Rev. Holly MillerShank

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*“Look at us,” Hetrick says from behind his signature round-rimmed glasses. “Look what the dead are telling me. The dead are telling me we have a structural issue within our society. Why are the richest and the freest people in all of history deciding to kill themselves and destroy themselves?”*

The quote just hung there, filling the air, seemingly written in 78 point font instead of the typical 12. Graham Hetrick, the Dauphin County Coroner, was interviewed on his work by Penn Live. Hetrick’s stark interview concluded with a hypothesis on death; that all too often suicide, addiction and preventable (or at minimum manageable) diseases win. The turning point to this tsunami of avoidable deaths? A spiritual awakening.

The world was rocked by the recent suicides of Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain, two people who seemed to have it all. Unfortunately suicide is increasingly common. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention estimates that 44,965 Americans die annually by suicide. Guns are by far the leading method of successful suicides. In the decade from 2006-2016 approximately 218,000 Americans, or 60 people per day, ended their lives with a gun.

Suicides are a growing public health crisis, and gun safety laws are an integral part of the solution. Red Flag Laws, once thought to be impossible given the political climate, are being implemented across the United States. These laws permit the police or family members to petition the court to remove guns from individuals deemed to be a danger to themselves or others. These state-by-state pieces of legislation go beyond The Federal Gun Control Act of 1968, which impedes the selling or transfer of firearms or ammunition to certain individuals diagnosed with mental health conditions. (Click here to view the Red Flag laws in your state.)

Through rare work across the political divide the gun industry and advocates for gun safety have been working together to inform gun owners of the signs and risks of suicide. However, as Graham Hetrick opines, that’s likely not enough.

The world has lost its moral compass. As Christians, Jesus continues to point us to deeper relationship with God and with one another. As people of faith we are

told “Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Be strong and courageous.” (Joshua 10:25). May we be courageous in advocating for safer gun laws, in asking the question directly if someone has considered harming themselves, and in seeking a just world for all.

If you or someone you know may be considering suicide, contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 (En Español: 1-888-628-9454; Deaf and Hard of Hearing: 1-800-799-4889) or the Crisis Text Line by texting 741741.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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