HAPPINESS IS A WARM GUN?

This is about my love/hate relationship with guns. As a young man, I was lucky to have an uncle who taught me how to shoot. I learned a little gun safety but never quite got the hang of gun cleaning. On our so-called hunting trips to the rocky dry wash near my hometown of Redlands, California, we toted a high-powered 30-06 hunting rifle, a single-barreled shotgun, a .45 automatic, and a Colt revolver. Mostly, I shot at old beer cans and pop bottles. My uncle took aim at a cave mouth and fired into it, but nothing was stirring, not even a mouse. We were supposed to be hunting for jackrabbits, but I never wanted to see any animal, let alone shoot one. Other than skeet shooting at clay pigeons during summer camp, I haven't handled a gun since. Yet I still remember the look and feel of those firearms I carried in San Timoteo Canyon. I admired the workmanship and incredible firepower of my uncle's weapons. I learned not to be afraid of them, even though I have no use for them in my life now. I acknowledge that guns have a seductive appeal: the blue steel, the hefty pistol grip, the smooth rifle stock on my cheek, the smell of gun oil, the metallic snick of cocking a trigger and chambering a round, the unique sound of spinning a cylinder loaded with bullets, the gut-wrenching sensation of pumping a shell into the firing chamber of a shotgun, and finally the thump of ammunition exploding and the gun's recoil smacking against my shoulder. Guns are not inherently evil, just evil-utionary. Ever since Cain slew Abel, people have been looking for bigger and badder ways to kill each other and kill other species. Sticks and stones and guns. Let's face it: Violence is in our nature. We are violent predators, the top of the food chain. But guns themselves are not to blame. They are simply a product of our violent imaginations.

Of course, we still need to regulate guns, because they are dangerous weapons, even in the right hands (military, law enforcement, hunters, sportsmen). But more important, we need to take responsibility for our own inherent evil as a species. Whether we kill for pleasure, profit, or patriotism, it's all the same, really.

So we can and should regulate guns, but what are we going to do about our violent human nature? Obviously, we can't regulate human nature. All previous attempts to do so have failed miserably, and have produced even worse (unintended) consequences. Think about it: holy wars, occupations, torture, brainwashing, all done in the name of "regulating" other people. None of them really work in the long run. Instead, we need to focus on the root causes of violence. Massacres, from Columbine to Sandy Hook, were made possible by the ready availability of assault weapons. That has to change. But we know that guns are only part of the problem. We also need to understand the role of our violence-saturated media (including video games), our warlike nationalism, our lack of an effective mental health safety net, our self-centered value system, our materialistic culture, our weak economy, our angry and paranoid society. Instead of armed guards in our schools, we need teachers and counselors armed with the most advanced "weapons" of understanding and coping with alienation. We need to teach nonviolence and communication as ways of dealing with our problems. We need to teach young and old how to negotiate through crises, how to be proactive with troubled people, how to recognize and treat depression and anxiety, how to prevent violence. We need to be smarter and stronger than a disgruntled 20-year-old with a trench coat and an assault rifle. We are so good at flying fast and high, blowing things up, computing at the speed of light, curing many diseases, but where are we in our work to understand and prevent the violence in our dark souls?