

Logic and Lawn Darts
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia
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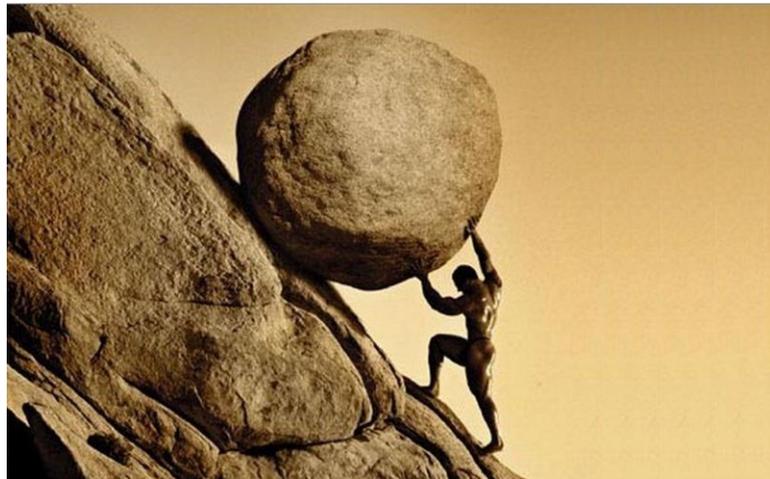
Time for All Ages
Sisyphus

Once upon a time, there was a city badly in need of fresh water. One day the leader of the city, whose name was Sisyphus, saw the king of the gods passing by with a water faerie. Soon afterwards, the water faerie's father passed by and asked Sisyphus if he had seen his daughter.

Sisyphus told the father that he would reveal the daughter's whereabouts in return for a spring of fresh water. The two agreed and the father took his daughter back from the king of the gods.

Now, this made the king of the gods very angry. So, he commanded his brother who ruled the underworld to take Sisyphus there and bind him with chains. But, Sisyphus was very clever. Sisyphus asked the ruler of the underworld how the locks on the chains worked. And when he unlocked Sisyphus to show how they worked, Sisyphus locked him in his own chains.

And so Sisyphus escaped back to the world. Now, the king of the gods was really angry. As a punishment, he forced Sisyphus to spend the rest of his life rolling a huge boulder up a steep hill. But, every time Sisyphus got the boulder to the very top of the hill, it would roll down the other side.



Now, you might think this was a terrible fate for Sisyphus. But, in reality, Sisyphus knew that he had bested the gods and helped his people. And while he knew the gods had the power to punish him, they could not make him angry about his punishment. And so Sisyphus defied the gods by enduring his task and showing the gods that they could not break his spirit.

Reflection Reading
From “Kasī Bhāradvāja Sutta” from *Sutta Nipāta*¹

On one occasion the Buddha was living at a monastery in the brahman village of Ekanālā...Approximately 500 of the brahman Kasī Bhāradvāja 's plows were yoked at the sowing time. In the early morning, putting on his lower robe and taking his bowl, the Blessed One went to where Kasī Bhāradvāja was working...[and the] food-distribution was underway... Kasī Bhāradvāja saw the Blessed One standing for alms, and on

seeing him, said to him, "I plow and sow. Having plowed and sown, I eat. You, too, contemplative, should plow and sow. Having plowed and sown, you (will) eat."



The Buddha replied, "I, too, brahman, plow and sow. Having plowed and sown, I eat."

"But, I don't see the Master's yoke or plow, plowshare, goad, or oxen, and yet the Master says: 'I, too, brahman, plow and sow. Having plowed and sown, I eat.'"

Kasī Bhāradvāja said, "You claim to be a plowman, but I don't see your plowing."

The Buddha responded:

Conviction is my seed, austerity my rain, discernment my yoke and plow, conscience my pole, mind my yoke-tie, mindfulness my plowshare and goad. Guarded in body, guarded in speech, restrained in terms of belly and food, I make truth a weeding-hook, and composure my unyoking. Persistence, my beast of burden, bearing me toward rest from the yoke, takes me, without turning back, to where, having gone, one doesn't grieve. That's how my plowing is plowed. It has as its fruit the deathless. Having plowed this plowing one is unyoked from all suffering and stress.

Then Kasī Bhāradvāja, having heaped up milk-rice in a large bronze serving bowl, offered it to the Blessed One, saying, "May the Master eat this milk-rice. The master is a plowman, and his fruit is the deathless."

Sermon – Logic and Lawn Darts

Sometimes when I recall my childhood with romantic nostalgia, I wonder how we survived our formative years alive. My friends and I routinely played with toys that no company would consider manufacturing today. We romped on steel playgrounds anchored into crushed stone yards. And, we generally roamed the neighborhood unsupervised for hours at a time without fear of predators, abductors, molesters, or stray bullets.

Enough accidents and tragic occurrences raised the safety consciousness of a generation of Americans, so that now we can hardly avoid warnings of the mayhem possible from even the most innocent products. A few years ago, an online publication called *Radar Magazine* published a list of the most dangerous toys of all time. Obviously one can hardly expect such a list to be terribly scientific, but apparently the choices were made according to the ability of these toys to kill, maim, or generally hazard the wellbeing of children receiving them as gifts. I credit the authors of the list with spanning the last few generations of ingenious toy craft. I have no doubt that each of you will identify with at least one of these deliverers of destruction.

In tenth place was the Fisher-Price Harley Davidson Power Wheels Motorcycle. The throttle of this motorized vehicle apparently got stuck in full acceleration mode on occasion, sending the rider on an uncontrolled journey toward collision.

In ninth place landed several 1979 *Battlestar Galactica* Missile Launchers, which propelled projectiles small enough to fit into unsuspecting throats.

Now, for the older children among us, we have our eighth place finisher, the Johnny Reb Cannon. While people apparently had no problems with its glorification of the Confederacy upon its release in 1961 (the centennial of the start of the Civil War), the Reb fired hard, plastic cannonballs up to 35 feet. Apparently, our toy makers don't learn their lesson about small projectiles from one generation to another.

At number seven, we have Creepy Crawlers. Of course, one could take one's pick here from Easy-Bake Ovens to my personal favorite from my childhood, the Vacuiform. Nothing says safety like an open hot plate and exposed 100-watt light bulbs.

Another toy from the older generation comes in at number six. The Bat Masterson Derringer Belt Gun combined the cap-firing fun of a gun with a belt buckle. What could possibly go wrong there?

Number five brings us Sky Dancers – a toy of which I was blissfully ignorant before writing this sermon. Sold in the late 1990's, one apparently stuck their little fairie feet into a launcher, pulled a string, and sent the twirling toys into the air.

We probably all remember those hideous (in my personal opinion) Cabbage Patch Dolls and number four brings us the 1996 Snacktime Kids Doll, which apparently had no shut off switch for its ravenous, munching jaws.

At number three, Mini-Hammocks from EZ Sales. Unfortunately, children often found themselves emulating a chrysalis with no chance of emerging as a butterfly.

My personal favorite chimes in at number two. Heaven help the person in my way at an estate sale offering this delight. Gilbert, the company that gave us the infamous Erector Set, in 1951 produced the U-238 Atomic Energy Lab. For a mere \$49.50, the kit came complete with four actual samples of Uranium-bearing ores, a Geiger counter, and a Spintariscope (to see "live" radioactive disintegration). Lucky kids also received a comic book (*Dagwood Splits the Atom*) and a government manual titled, "Prospecting for Uranium."



And now – drum roll please – the number one most dangerous toy of all time. Lawn Darts! Sort of a javelin-version of horseshoes (my set was known as Jarts), one lobbed the metal tipped arrows underhand toward a plastic hoop lying on the grass. The large spear impaled itself in the dirt, hopefully scoring points for the thrower.

Now, lest you think this particular survey unfairly castigates the dignity of these fine products, let's review the known findings of reputable analysts. According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission, Fisher-Price recalled more than 200,000 of the Power Wheels Motorcycles in 2000 after receiving nine reports of sticking foot pedals on these mechanized deathtraps. One three-year-old boy suffered cuts and bruises when his out-of-control bike ran into a home.² Mattel offered a "Missile Mail-in" to replace the small, red plastic bullets launched from the *Battlestar Gallactica* toys. Even though the product met or exceeded all existing and proposed safety standards at the

time, there were instances of accidental swallowing of missiles, including one reported death of a four-year-old child.³

One can imagine similar reports from the Johnny Reb Cannon, and the danger from Creepy Crawler burns were probably only exceeded by the nauseating taste of the toxic chemicals comprising them. One product safety organization reportedly claimed that the Bat Masterson belt gun's caps "can be ignited by friction and cause serious burns." I won't speculate what kind of friction they thought a 10-year old boy would experience on his belt.

Injuries from Galoob's Sky Dancers reportedly included scratched corneas and temporary blindness, mild concussions, broken ribs and teeth, and facial lacerations that required stitches. Nearly nine million Sky Dancers were eventually recalled by 2000 and the company fined \$400,000.⁴

After 35 fingers and ponytails fell victim to Snacktime Kids' appetites, Mattel removed them from shelves forever, and offered 500,000 customers a full \$40 refund.⁵

Between 1984 and 1995, twelve children between the ages of five and seventeen years old became entangled and died when using the Mini-Hammocks. A seven-year-old girl suffered permanent brain damage from a near-strangulation. A mother found her five-year-old boy entangled, but was able to resuscitate him. As a result, three million of the devices were recalled.⁶ I won't even hazard to speculate about the impact of the Atomic Energy Lab.



After deciding that voluntary agreements on stricter labeling and marketing were not having the desired effect, in 1987 the Consumer Product Safety Commission voted to ban lawn darts. The Commission had records of three deaths associated with lawn darts since 1970. Lawn darts were linked with an estimated 700 emergency room visits each year.⁷ Commission Chair Ann Brown went so far as to recommend that "Parents should destroy these banned lawn darts immediately." Commissioner Anne Graham added, "What limited

recreational value lawn darts may have is far outweighed by the number of serious injuries and unnecessary deaths...There are numerous alternatives to lawn darts, and I would urge adults who have lawn darts to throw them away now."⁸

Created in 1972 (sadly too late for some of our examples), the Consumer Product Safety Commission is a federal agency charged with protecting the public from unreasonable risks of serious injury or death from thousands of types of consumer products under the agency's jurisdiction. The Commission's work to ensure the safety of consumer products is believed to have contributed to the 30% decline in the rate of deaths and injuries linked to such products.

The Commission has authority "over more than 15,000 kinds of consumer products used in and around the home, in sports, recreation and schools." But, the Commission does not claim jurisdiction over *all* categories of products. For example,

food, drugs, cosmetics, and medical devices fall under the purview of the Food and Drug Administration; automobiles, trucks, motorcycles, and tires are the responsibility of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Pesticides are included as part of the sphere of activity of the Environmental Protection Agency, and boats lie under the authority of the Coast Guard.

But, let's move away from kid's stuff (literally) and jump to the big three. Alcohol and tobacco are regulated by the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau, whose primary function is to "ensure that only qualified persons engage in the alcohol beverage industry... [and] enforcing laws related to alcohol production, importation, and wholesale businesses; tobacco manufacturing and importing businesses; and alcohol labeling and advertising.." ⁹ This body and regulation of firearms fall under the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. The BATF mission is "to protect communities from violent criminals, criminal organizations, the illegal use and trafficking of firearms, the illegal use and storage of explosives, acts of arson and bombings, acts of terrorism, and the illegal diversion of alcohol and tobacco products" ¹⁰



You may note a subtle distinction between the roles of these various entities. The Consumer Product Safety Commission regulates the distribution *and* the design and manufacture of consumer products. The Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau and the BATF, on the other hand, only regulate the distribution of the products within their sphere of operation, as well as the improper use of them by consumers. So, while the government empowers the Consumer Product Safety Commission to prevent companies from producing a dangerous product, the other agencies can only penalize those who abuse the laws regarding the sale, distribution, and use of alcohol,

tobacco, and firearms once they have already been manufactured. One agency recaptures the cow after leaving the barn. The other keeps the calf from being born at all.

I am sure that critiquing the operations or the relative success of any of these important government bodies provides ample employment to various watchdog groups and analysts. Given their particular notoriety, one could certainly spend significant time examining the merits (or lack thereof) of certain historic BATF actions. Instead, I offer a suggestion that will simplify the work of every BATF agent by removing any ambiguities from their mission to protect this nation's communities.

I call for a total ban on privately-owned handguns and for the confiscation and destruction of all such weapons in existence. I call for the elimination of all private ownership of handguns in this country *and* a ban on the production of handguns for the use of anyone but authorized law enforcement agents forever.

I understand that efforts to control handguns in this country have met with one failure after another. Since the shooting of James Brady in 1981 during John Hinckley's attempted assassination of President Ronald Reagan, gun control advocates have run into one roadblock after another, largely due to the furious lobbying efforts of the

National Rifle Association. And I acknowledge that my personal stand lies far beyond that of any organization advocating for gun control in America today.



But, I do not call for gun *control*. I support expanded background checks, and increased regulations on gun vendors, but believe we must go much further. I do not care what the founders wrote 200 years ago or how even the most impartial jurist might interpret their meanings today. The time is long overdue for us as a nation to completely and forever cut our ties with all handguns as being inimical to human life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. To paraphrase an earlier quote, what limited value handguns may have is far outweighed by the number of serious injuries and unnecessary deaths.

Now, I suspect even the most peace-loving among you might contemplate certain questions that arise from this call:

- What's wrong with owning a handgun for target shooting?
- What's wrong with carrying a handgun for my personal protection?
- How will we get handguns away from criminals?

Legitimate questions – let's address each one.

Some people own handguns merely for the enjoyment of target shooting. I myself have fired pistols at a shooting range and understand the pleasure of the sport. Let's recall our list of infamous toys. All 10 combined resulted in fewer than 20 deaths. Obviously, the preventable and unnecessary death of even one child should deeply sadden us. But, lawn dawns caused only three reported deaths over 16 years, and were banned by the federal government.

In contrast, even the most ardent supporter of handgun ownership must agree that many hundreds of thousands of people have died from handgun homicides, accidents, and suicides during my lifetime. If we can ban businesses from even manufacturing a toy with only the *potential* of personal injury, why can we not ban a product with a long-proven track record of far more death and destruction?

But, criminals still have guns and I need to protect myself. Yes, you do. Let's examine our actions in response to another similar circumstance. The federal government began establishing standards to phase out the use of lead additives to gasoline when the harmful effects to human health and the environment became apparent. Environmental protection regulations caused the automobile industry to turn itself on its collective ear to alter vehicle design and assembly, and the oil industry was forced to change its gasoline production and distribution processes. And, aside from the reported deaths of original research team members early on of lead poisoning, leaded gas was not linked directly to any deaths. From January 1, 1996, the Clean Air Act banned the sale of leaded fuel for use in on-road vehicles. Possession and use of leaded gasoline in a regular on-road vehicle now carries a maximum \$10,000 fine.¹¹

The point is that we identified an inherent danger. We found a usable alternative – unleaded gas – and we banned the dangerous product. So the obvious question arises. Does an alternative exist to handguns for personal safety purposes? Of course it does. One alternative – the taser – works just as effectively, is much less prone to accidental misuse, and results in death only in rare cases. Only five states currently ban the use of Tasers and stun guns.¹²

What about handguns already being used by criminals? As gun ownership advocates fondly say, when we criminalize guns, only criminals will have guns. Baloney. I know that I should be more theological and intellectual about my response to this argument. But, if we banned handgun manufacture and importation, then only time and the enforcement of laws stand between us and a relatively handgun-free America. Handguns are not marijuana – people can't grow pistols in their backyards.

Will a handgun ban stop violent crime? Of course not. Kids will find ways to injure themselves no matter how many sharp edges and toxic substances you remove from their environment. Likewise, criminals may well use rifles, knives, clubs, hand grenades, or just their fists to commit acts of violence. That argument, however, offers no reason to oppose efforts to attempt to reduce and even eliminate deaths directly associated with private handgun ownership.

What solutions do I offer if we attempt this transition? Given our government's propensity for throwing money at solutions, I ask for a relatively modest sum to fund the following initiatives:

- For one year, offer every recreational owner who turns in a handgun cash, or an appraised trade-in on a bow and arrow, rifle, shotgun, or other legal firearm of their choice – after that, all handguns will be confiscated and destroyed;
- Provide every collector of historic handguns free conversion of their weapon, making it incapable of firing to avoid confiscation;
- Offer every registered owner who turns in a protective handgun a free taser, stun gun, or other non-lethal option;
- Provide research and development funding to the New Jersey Institute of Technology and the many companies working to perfect “smart guns,” and then convert every handgun used by law enforcement agents to incorporate biometric recognition¹³ or similar techniques; and
- Make mandatory sentencing associated with handgun-related crime so onerous, that no sane criminal will consider their use.

What would these initiatives cost? No one really knows how many handguns Americans possess. But, given our history of industry bailouts, and our exorbitant military expenditures over the years, the direct potential gain in human life and reduction of human misery far outweigh the costs.

Now, I am no lawyer and have no interest in haggling over budgetary priorities and implications. But, as a clergyman, I must address certain recent decisions in our halls of government. A 5-4 Supreme Court decision in June 2010 on *McDonald v. the City of Chicago*, cited the Second Amendment's right to bear arms – and specifically the right to possess a handgun – as “fundamental to the Nation's scheme of ordered liberty” in trumping the ability of local governments to protect their residents by creating

common-sense regulations on handguns.¹⁴ A month later, Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal signed into law a bill authorizing persons who qualify to carry concealed weapons, and having passed necessary training and background checks, to bring them to churches, mosques, synagogues, or other houses of worship.¹⁵ We activists for common sense gun laws have fought our own version of that legislation in Michigan for the past several years.



More than 10,000 Americans die from handgun injuries every year. I say, "enough." Whoever you are, I welcome *you* into this house of worship. But, I do not welcome your weapons and I specifically do not welcome your handguns. Arrest me, sue me, fine me. But, I will never knowingly allow anyone to bring a handgun into any congregation I serve. If we take a stand against handguns, then let it start here in our houses of worship.

Here, where we dedicate ourselves to loving our neighbors and to bringing about a better life on earth – here is where we say "no" now and forever to handguns.

Our government routinely bans products with only the potential to cause harm. Drugs that may well cure diseases face rejection after years of development and study. Foods that may only cause illness are regularly ordered destroyed. And companies that manufacture toys that perhaps may harm a child face fines, lawsuits, and bans. Saving just one innocent child should make a handgun ban worth any price.

So, where is our equivalent collective outrage against this far-greater ill plaguing our populace? I say it should reside here, here in our churches, mosques, synagogues, and other houses of worship. Here, as children of a higher purpose and universal laws of humanity and love, we should demand the protection from these threats to our well-being and to our lives.

In the coming months, groups will call upon our President Elect and the Republican majority in Congress to create laws and budgets that reflect the moral principles of this nation. Let us, as religious people, include a call for sanity and demand that our government regulate the production and sale of all products threatening our lives.

Prayerful Reflection

Unifying source of light and life, of joy and love, lift up our hearts in this moment of meditation.

Progressive messages fall on soils of varying levels of fertility. Some hear and understand the importance of the call, but bow to the inevitability of the status quo over change. Some welcome the call, but lack the will and the discipline to bear its message

effectively. Some hear but reject the call out of self-interest and resistance to sacrifice. They listen instead to other voices who deflect blame and defer responsibility.

In his work *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus challenged the notion that Sisyphus suffered under the weight of a meaningless task. But Camus concluded that the struggle against the irrationality and seeming meaninglessness of life is enough to fill our hearts. In an absurd world, we must embrace the spirit of revolt, complete freedom, and passion for living. He calls us to imagine Sisyphus as happy.

May this message today fall on fertile soil, where it will produce good fruit. May this house of worship become the field on which we will cultivate the seeds of change in our world. Even if we do not live to see the harvest, may we find fulfillment in the tilling.

Amen, Blessed Be, and Let it be so.



Extinguishing the Chalice/Closing Words From Barack Obama's speech at the Tucson 1/12/2011 memorial service



“...heroism is found not only on the fields of battle...heroism does not require special training or physical strength. Heroism is here, in the hearts of so many of our fellow citizens, all around us, just waiting to be summoned...what, beyond prayers and expressions of concern, is required of us going forward? How can we honor the fallen? How can we be true to their memory?...We cannot and will not be passive in the face of such violence. We should be willing to challenge old assumptions in order to lessen the prospects of such violence in the future.¹⁶

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- ¹ <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.1.04.than.html>
 - ² <http://www.cpsc.gov/CPSCPUB/PREREL/prhtml00/00175.html>
 - ³ <http://www.cpsc.gov/CPSCPUB/PREREL/prhtml79/79001.html>
 - ⁴ <http://www.cpsc.gov/CPSCPUB/PREREL/prhtml01/01017.html>
 - ⁵ <http://www.cpsc.gov/CPSCPUB/PREREL/PRHTML97/97055org.html> and <http://www.cpsc.gov/CPSCPUB/PREREL/PRHTML97/cabbage.html>
 - ⁶ <http://www.cpsc.gov/CPSCPUB/PREREL/PRHTML96/96183.html>
 - ⁷ <http://www.cpsc.gov/CPSCPUB/PREREL/prhtml88/88089.html>
 - ⁸ <http://www.cpsc.gov/CPSCPUB/PREREL/PRHTML97/97122.html>
 - ⁹ <http://www.ttb.gov/consumer/responsibilities.shtml>
 - ¹⁰ <https://www.justice.gov/jmd/organization-mission-and-functions-manual-bureau-alcohol-tobacco-firearms-and-explosives>
 - ¹¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gasoline#Lead>
 - ¹² <http://www.criminaldefenselawyer.com/stun-gun-faq/states-that-ban-stun-guns.html>
 - ¹³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smart_Gun
 - ¹⁴ http://criminaljustice.change.org/blog/view/the_supreme_court_strikes_down_handgun_bans
 - ¹⁵ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/07/07/bobby-jindal-signs-guns-i_n_638047.html
 - ¹⁶ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/12/remarks-president-barack-obama-memorial-service-victims-shooting-tucson>