The cell phones in the pockets of the dead students were still ringing when we were told that it was wrong to ask why. As the police cleared the bodies from the Virginia Tech engineering building, the cell phones rang, in the eccentric varieties of ring tones, as parents kept trying to see if their children were O.K. To imagine the feelings of the police as they carried the bodies and heard the ringing, heartrending; to imagine the feelings of the parents who were calling — dread, desperate hope for a sudden answer and the bliss of reassurance, dawning grief — unbearable. But the parents, and the rest of us, told that it not the right moment to ask how the shooting happened — specifically, why an obviously disturbed student, with a history of mental illness, able to buy guns whose essential purpose to kill people — and why it over and over again in America. At a press conference, Virginia’s governor, Tim Kaine, said, “People who to make it their political hobby horse to ride, I’ve got nothing but loathing for them. At this point, what it’s about comforting family members and helping this community heal. And so to those who want to try to make this into some little crusade, I say take that elsewhere.”
If the facts are not so horrible, there might be something touching in the Governor’s deeply American belief that “healing” can take place magically, without the intervening practice called “treating.” The logic is unusual but striking: the aftermath of a terrorist attack, the wrong time to talk about security, the aftermath of a death from lung cancer, the wrong time to talk about smoking and the tobacco industry, and the aftermath of a car crash, the wrong time to talk about seat belts. People talked about the shooting, of course, but much of the conversation was devoted to musings on the treatment of mental illness in universities, the problem of “narcissism,” violence in the media and in popular culture, copycat killings, the alienation of immigrant students, and the question of Evil.

Some people, however — especially people outside America — eager to talk about it in another way, and even to embark on a little crusade. The whole world saw that the United States has more gun violence than other countries because we have more guns and are willing to sell them to madmen who want to kill people. Every nation has violent loners, and they tend to have remarkably similar profiles from one country and culture to the next. And every country known the horror of having a lunatic get his hands on a gun and kill innocent people. But on a recent list of the fourteen worst mass shootings in Western democracies since the nineteen-sixties the United States claimed seven, and, just as important, no other country on the list had had a repeat performance as severe as the first.

In Dunblane, Scotland, in 1996, a gunman killed sixteen children and a teacher at their school. Afterward, the British gun laws, already restrictive, tightened — it now against the law for any private citizen in the United Kingdom to own the kinds of guns that Cho Seung-Hui used at Virginia Tech — and nothing like Dunblane occurred there since. In Quebec, after a school shooting took the lives of fourteen women in 1989, the survivors helped begin a gun-control movement that resulted in
legislation bringing stronger, though far from sufficient, gun laws to Canada. (There have been a couple of subsequent shooting sprees, but on a smaller scale, and with far fewer dead.) In the Paris suburb of Nanterre, in 2002, a man killed eight people at a municipal meeting. Gun control became a key issue in the Presidential election that year, and there has been no repeat incident.

So there is no American particularity about loners, disenfranchised immigrants, narcissism, alienated youth, complex moral agency, or Evil. There is an American particularity about guns. The arc is apparent. Forty years ago, a man killed fourteen people on a college campus in Austin, Texas; this year, a man killed thirty-two in Blacksburg, Virginia. Not enough done between those two massacres to make weapons of mass killing harder to obtain. In fact, while campus killings continued—Columbine being the most notorious, the shooting in the one-room Amish schoolhouse among the most recent—weapons have got more lethal, and, in states like Virginia, where the N.R.A. is powerful, no harder to buy.

Reducing the number of guns available to crazy people will neither relieve them of their insanity nor stop them from killing. Making it more difficult to buy guns that kill people, however, a rational way to reduce the number of people killed by guns. Nations with tight gun laws have, on the whole, less gun violence; countries with somewhat restrictive gun laws have some gun violence; countries with essentially no gun laws have a lot of gun violence. (If you work hard, you can find a statistical exception hiding in a corner, but exceptions are just that. Some people who smoke their whole lives not get lung cancer, while some people who never smoke do; still, the best way not to get lung cancer not to smoke.)

It’s true that in renewing the expired ban on assault weapons we can’t guarantee that someone won’t shoot people with a semi-automatic pistol, and that by controlling semi-automatic pistols we can’t reduce the chances of
someone killing people with a rifle. But the point of lawmaking is not to act as precisely as possible, in order to punish the latest crime; it is to act as comprehensively as possible, in order to prevent the next one. Semi-automatic Glocks and Walthers, Cho’s weapons, are for killing people. They are not made for hunting, and it’s not easy to protect yourself with them. (If having a loaded semi-automatic on hand kept you safe, cops would not be shot as often as they are.)

Rural America is hunting country, and hunters need rifles and shotguns — with proper licensing, we’ll live with the risk. There is no reason that any private citizen in a democracy should own a handgun. At some point, that simple truth will register. Until it does, phones will ring for dead children, and parents will be told not to ask why.