

Sighting In

Written by Vivian Bikulege



When I was a senior in high school, I was captain of the rifle team. Practice was held in a rifle range carved out of concrete under the swimming pool in the physical education building. Four team members – Fred, Jack, Glenn and me – went on to win the Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic state championship in 1976 at the end of the season. Each of us mastered one position – prone, sitting, kneeling, or standing. I shot prone and started for the team at every match, helping to set the pace and establish a base score.

The skill required to shoot a score of 100 - 10x, a perfect ten rounds using a .22-caliber rifle, is built on breath control and focus. To block out background noise, I squeezed insulated earphones over the crown of my head. A leather sling was belted over my rifle jacket around my right bicep and attached to my gun, stabilizing the rifle against my shoulder socket as I lay down on a floor mat, grinding my hips into position. My feet stretched behind me in black Converse high tops. My long brown hair was cinched back in a ponytail and secured with a Goody's rubber band, and I wore a patch over my left eye under wire-rimmed aviator glasses to keep my face from twitching as I glared down the barrel with my right eye through a slate black tube.

I was a good shot and I had something then that I hope to regain in 2013 – focus. Of course, a lot has changed from 70's teenager to the fifty-something woman I am today. Age and gravity are obvious culprits in my metamorphosis, but I blame other things for my distractions – stress, technology, multitasking, financial worry, caretaking, my job, and household responsibilities; all legitimate hurdles but not insurmountable.

News, current events and politics divert my attention as well. In fact, a key reason for writing about my days as a marksman, other than the metaphor for focus, arose from a year in America ending in horror and tragedy. I think about Sandy Hook and Webster, New York as 2012 ends, and even though I was raised with guns, competing for four years on a rifle team, I am convinced that some sort of legislation around the sale of semi and fully automatic weapons is imperative in 2013.

Along with competitive shooting, I was also a young hunter. I went to safety classes sponsored by my father's sportsman's club and the state game commission. I was the only girl in the class. The teachers were men handing down tradition and respect for guns to a room filled with fathers and sons dressed in camouflage or bright neon orange, and surrounded by glassy eyed animals; thick-throated buck and wild boar, antelope and pheasant, a standing raccoon and mallards lifting off from imaginary ponds. We weren't learning how to fire M1's or M14 assault weapons. We were being tested on the safe use and handling of rifles and shotguns, instructed to keep the gun safety switch on at all times until we were ready to shoot, and warned to never, ever, point a loaded or unloaded weapon at anyone.

When outrage rose in mid-December over the availability of high-powered assault rifles to the general public, I was not surprised by a dramatic increase in the demand for and sale of these guns. For a moment, I toyed with reasons why guns with names like Bushmaster AR-15 and Sig Sauer M400 need a place in anyone's home. Was it the threat of war and terrorism lurking outside our back doors? Maybe. Will I need to be armed and ready to fend off intruders at a moment's notice with a gun that fires a shot with every pull of the trigger, spitting bullets in split seconds, with no need to eject and reload a single shell or bullet? Keeping a pistol in the bedroom nightstand seems tolerable, but I do not believe that exercising my second amendment right includes owning a machine gun; but how do we craft legislation around the two?

Perhaps it's a bit bizarre that I've chosen guns, gun ownership and competitive shooting as part of my annual tradition to select one word around which I can craft my new year's behavior, but *focus*

made me think about all of the good things I learned when I used to shoot. In 2013, I want to deliberately set out to complete each and every task to the best of my ability, with keen direction, attentiveness and commitment. I want to listen to others when they speak and block out the noise around me and in my head. If I am on my iPhone or texting, I want to be polite about it. If I am assigned a project at work, I want to set a deadline, rally the resources I need to support my efforts, and complete it thoughtfully. And because I am not getting any younger and my focus wanes with my age, I want to exercise every day to sharpen my mind and maintain a body I hope to live in for another thirty years.

However noble my goal of focus in the new year may be, the word made me think of guns, and guns reminded me of the worst of 2012. Of course, there is the cliché that *guns don't kill, people do*, and I agree. I also believe that legitimate hunters eat what they kill. But what coerces a person into unthinkable violent and murderous acts in elementary schools, neighborhoods, movie theaters,

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shopping malls and universities? The real challenge is to focus on our nation's psyche. My real hurdle in 2013 is not my focus on work and technology. It was and always will be my focus on love, compassion, patience, and mercy. Maybe Wal-Mart can stock *those* items as accessibly as Winchester hollow-point bullets. A rush to acquire those virtues in the new year might make our fall off the fiscal cliff less impactful. But that's another subject. Happy New Year.

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