

To the Chapel Hill Friends Meeting,

On October 28th, 2016, I officially relinquished my childhood. This came with some benefits: I could sign my own field trip permission forms for school, vote in the presidential election, and start coming up with excuses to get out of jury duty. My birthday was also a stark reminder of the reality my male peers had looming over their own celebrations; eighteen is the deadline of registration for the Selective Service. Currently, women do not have to register, so I was exempt on the grounds of my gender, but the whole circumstance got me thinking. This letter is the culmination of many months of just that.

I am opposed to my personal involvement in any and all war, whether I'm firing the weapon myself, or in any way aiding those that are. I was raised in a faith community where I was taught there is something sacred within each and every human being, without exception. To kill another person, directly or indirectly, kills what I was taught to value--human life.

I was reminded of this reality a few weeks ago when my best friend from nerd camp, informed me she had received a gun license. Now my friend, a young woman who does not eat meat unless the animal has been fairly raised and ethically slaughtered, is the last person I can see getting a gun license. And I have to admit, I felt betrayed.

I really, really don't like guns. Guns help people dehumanize each other. They allow us to kill one another at a physical distance, and with that physical distance, we can emotionally distance ourselves from the person whose life we are ending.

We often ask how people are able to slaughter their neighbors during a genocide. That is unthinkable to most of us: "How are you able to kill people you used to live next door to?"

We don't ask the same question of people in war. Maybe because we assume that war is not fought against our peers but those fundamentally different from us. War encourages dehumanization of the enemy. We teach people to not think of the human life they are silencing but of the dogma, the patriotism, the safety, the thrill, or the service. War is complex, but these do not justify the of killing people nor the destroying of communities.

My grandmother grew up near Munich, with her two older brothers. There's a picture of all of them hanging in our living room. I grew up hearing my grandmother's stories of how her brothers used to steal their dad's tools and blame her for the missing items.

As World War II dawned, my grandmother, her two brothers, and her mother fled Germany for England. See, my great-grandmother was English by birth, so they thought they could find refuge there. They did, my grandmother and her mother at least. The boys, who were German citizens of military age, were turned away.

So the question arises of who killed my uncles. Was it the soldier who shot at two Germans somewhere on the Russian front? Or was it England, when they turned them away, knowing that meant return to Germany and enlistment. They were my age.

I grew up asking who the people in the old photo were. And I grew up learning the story this way: “when you are older, you will be taught a narrative about the good guys and the bad guys. It’s called war. Never forget, it is a just narrative.” It’s a belief that resonates with me to this day.

The person on the other side of the line has a life equally complex and valuable as my own. I don’t ever want to forget that. So I don’t ever want to participate in war.

Back to my friend, because her story really encapsulates a struggle I had while writing this letter. Not only is she incredibly smart and a terrible dancer, she’s a Muslim living in rural North Carolina. And given the political climate of this past year, I can see why the strange looks she got as a child might have escalated into full-on glares.

To feel that you can be safe without a gun in your hands is a privilege. To feel like your life, and lives of those you care about, are safe without you participating in a war is a privilege. It does not mean conscientious objection is easy, but I feel the need to recognize those who face even greater consequences than I for maintaining such beliefs.

My friend went on to explain to me that she had offered to help a new boy find the room of a club he was looking for, only to discover said club was her school’s rifle association. Attempting to leave, she was waylaid by her principal, the staff organizer of the club, who was overjoyed to see her supposed interest. You know those people who are bad at saying no? Yeah, that’s my friend--especially when it comes to her principal. Despite being horrified, she sat through 7 hours of safety lectures, shot a clay plate, and made her principal’s day. I asked her about it, she thinks she will take up art club. They meet on the same day, so she has an excuse to quit now.

It’s not until you hear about being alone that you recognize the value of a community that supports you. And I am very, very lucky to have one in the Quaker Meeting. Please keep this letter on record as a declaration of my beliefs. Thank you for being part of this journey.

Sincerely,

Grace Schneider

Sunday, February 19th, 2017